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A RISING STAR

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A RISING STAR

A NOVEL

BY

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AUTHOR OF

"BOB MARTIN'S LITTLE GIRL," "JOSEPH'S COAT," ETC., ETC

VOL. I.

London 1894

HUTCHINSON & CO.

34 PATERNOSTER ROW

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A RISING STAR.

CHAPTER I.

A YOUNG man with a head full of remarkable visions—brilliant, nonsensical, practicable and impracticable—sat in a Birmingham garret. As a matter of fact four bare walls surrounded him. His feet rested on an uncarpeted floor, and the plaster ceiling overhead looked as if some wild genius had covered it twice or thrice over with maps of unknown lands.

But the young man in reality was living at that moment among splendours in a sort of fairy

palace, attended by dim sweet nymphs and obsequious powder-headed footmen, and surrounded by all manner of dream-luxuries, likely, perhaps, to be little satisfying to the carnal appetite.

The young man was rather pallid, and, if his outer signs were to be trusted, was at least a bit of a poet.

He had a clear discerning eye, good and clear cut features, too; and, without being an Adonis, was, from the physical as well as the moral and intellectual standpoint, a boy who was pleasant to look at. The elderly and instructed observer had to make certain allowances for him. He was poorly dressed, and yet exhibited a kind of foppery in his attire. A threadbare cotton-velvet jacket proclaimed artistic inclinations a thought too openly,

and the young man's long hair and low collar told the same story.

There are people to whom Fancy is cheap, and there are people who cannot buy her at any price. The young man's imaginations were stimulated by a hint of the possible coming to his hands of a note of the Bank of England for ten pounds. When *Fata Morgana* builds, she does as well without a solid foundation as with one.

The dreamer's name was Mark Stanley, and his status was that of reporter for the daily press. He was second on the staff of one of the local journals, and enjoyed an income of forty shillings per week, supplemented at odd times, though not too richly, by gains from London, when any event of the town was important enough to justify a notice in the metropolitan papers.

He kept an aged mother up in Yorkshire, and fulfilled that sacred duty so well that in the course of a year or two he had grown anæmic, and was apt to pant if he ran upstairs to his garret too quickly.

The ten-pound note, the mere vague promise of which had filled his mind with such halcyon dreams, was due, if it were ever to become due, that morning. It was payable, if payable at all, by Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop, the eminent tragedian, of the Theatres Royal, Drury Lane and Covent Garden.

Mr. Wilstrop was travelling the country with the lovely and accomplished Miss Carrington, who had delighted the town for a fortnight past with representations of Lady Macbeth, Lady Isabel, Juliet, Ophelia, Desdemona and Pauline. Mr. Wilstrop, so the local papers said, had lent the lady

adequate support, whether as Claude Melnotte, as the melancholic Dane, or the immortal blackamoor.

A gentleman who in the course of a fortnight could assume not these three parts only but those of the sprightly Mercutio, of Mr. Archibald Carlyle, and of the bloodthirsty Thane, was necessarily a person of varied accomplishments. But Mr. Wilstrop was not contented to be bound by the limitations of a single art, however extensive they might be.

He had turned author, and had written an intolerable play, which with genuine modesty he had placed in the hands of Miss Carrington as the work of an anonymous writer. Miss Carrington had scoffed at the piece; and the actor-manager, after carrying it about for a year or so,

had confided it to the care of young Stanley, telling him that if he could make anything practicable out of it he might have a ten-pound note for his trouble.

Now the intolerable play included amongst the characters a cad and prig of abnormal proportions, who filled the position of hero, and was indeed just as much of a hero as Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop could conceive.

Young Stanley had sat in despair before this awful creation, recognising in him a ghastly resemblance to human nature of a sort, but not knowing how to change the wretch into anything which should wear the remotest resemblance to a serious dramatic hero.

Suddenly a brilliant idea crossed him, and he saw in a flash that with but one change in aspect

the figure would become supremely life-like. So he altered the final catastrophe, discomfiting the creature at the finish, and re-wrote the scene in which he first appeared, introducing him not as the hero, but as the scoundrel of the piece. That way the brute was almost as good as Mawworm, but his surroundings were altogether unworthy of him and had to be raised to his own high standard.

Just before the beginning of the pantomime season Miss Carrington and Mr. Wilstrop had fulfilled their first engagement at the Royal; and having achieved a reasonable success there, had been able to secure a date for April.

Young Stanley had had the manuscript confided to his care a week before Christmas, and had been slaving at it ever since with a loving ardour for which the ten-pound note of itself

would have afforded but the poorest compensation. But then he had his visions thrown into the bargain, and they seemed to make any amount of labour well worth his while.

The amended play, in which hardly a line remained unaltered, was in Mr. Wilstrop's hands, and had been for a week past. The ten-pound note looked almost certain, but there was still enough of doubt about it to lend piquancy to its coming.

It was a Sunday morning,—bright, clear, and spring-like. The sun was shining in Bath Row, and the house sparrows were chirping there, impertinently familiar. An odour of baked shoulder of mutton, which to the poetic and imaginative mind called up an actual vision of the reality, with potatoes over it, crisply brown

on top and richly saturated with gravy lower down, stole upstairs.

"My soul cries 'Cupboard,'" said Stanley, rising from his abstraction and looking out of the window. "Isn't that fellow coming after all?"

There was no one in sight in the street below; but at that very instant a boisterous, assertive knock rattled at the front door, and Mark ran downstairs to answer it.

Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop was there in person. He was gloriously habited, and wore a profusion of jewellery. In honour of the spring-like character of the day he had put on a white wide-awake hat, primrose-coloured gloves and a white waistcoat with coral buttons, though in recognition of the chill which pervaded the bright and sunlit air he wore an overcoat with astrachan cuffs and collar.

"Dear boy!" said Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop, by way of salutation, and shook hands effusively upon the doorstep.

His voice had a mellow husk in it, and his manner was remarkably genial. His clean-shaven face shone as if it had been anointed with the cream of human kindness, and the faintest touch of red at the tip of his nose gave him a certain air of jollity and good-fellowship.

"Come in," said Mark; and Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop, still holding with both hands to the hand the young man had extended to him, obeyed the invitation.

Once inside the hall he gave a parting double-handed shake, and so stood beaming as if he had performed an action of unusual benevolence, and was agreeably conscious of it.

“Upstairs, dear boy?” he said, in answer to a motion Mark made him to go before. “Certainly, certainly—to be sure.”

He went upstairs genially, and as if he were not too proud to do it; but arriving at the garret a little out of breath, drew a gorgeous silk handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his forehead on the landing, blending odours of frangipanni with the appetising scent of the roast shoulder which by this time filled the house. Mark threw open the door of his bedroom, and in dumb show invited the actor-manager to enter.

“Ha! ha!” said Mr. Wilstrop, nodding his head up and down with a world of benevolent meaning. “And this is where we hang out, dear boy? This is where we hang out?”

“Yes,” said Mark a little drily, “this is where we hang out. Have you read the play, Mr. Wilstrop? Won’t you take a chair?”

“I have read the play, dear boy,” said Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop, laying both gloved hands upon the young man’s shoulder with a genial little shake. “And I will take a chair.”

When Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop was genial he was much more genial than common people are who are less educated than he with respect to the fitting expression of emotion. If you surprised Mr. Wilstrop ever so little you surprised him more than you could have surprised an ordinary person by the most astounding intelligence. If you aroused a little anger in him he remembered Coriolanus, and “like an eagle in a dove-cote I”—et cetera. In short, all the emotions

were readily at Mr. Wilstrop's command ; but as in a well-compounded salad the oil reconciles all antagonistic ingredients, so in his manner the cream of human kindness, blent with every varying shade of expression, kept all sweet and smooth. At his angriest you were sure he was not disposed to be really very terrible.

He took a chair, as only a provincial actor-manager of the old school could have done it, and sat resplendent, unbuttoning and drawing off one primrose glove with such a benevolent air of being at his amiable ease and not too proud to sit there, that for the moment Mark wanted to hit him.

"What do you think about the piece?" the young man asked. "Does it please you?"

"Well, dear boy," said Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop, —and there paused as if unwilling to wound.

He beamed again a second later, and laying his glove upon the table before him with an air suddenly intimate and confidential, said: "It does and it doesn't. Personally, and so far as I am concerned, dear boy, you may rely upon a complete appreciation of your labours. You know what the dear old Swan says, dear boy—he says everything so delightfully that we poor devils of moderns haven't a chance against him—

The drama's laws the drama's patrons give,
And they who live to please must please to live."

"That's the Lichfield Swan," said Mark, who had apparently something still to learn with regard to the management of men. "Not the Swan of Avon."

"Were there two, dear boy?" said Mr. Wilstrop, with a faint momentary flush. "Never

mind. My memory was never very certain, and now that I'm falling into the sere and yellow it's getting worse than ever. I know it's one of the grand old Elizabethan fellows—never mind which. But to come back to our muttons. We have to deal with a public which is wanton, ignorant, and capricious. Wanton, ignorant, and capricious, dear boy. I could not have expressed myself better. For my own part I can assure you"—he was more solemn here than the average man would have been under oath in a case of murder—"I can assure you of my artistic sympathy. The manner in which you have developed my crude idea is perfect—ab-so-lutely perfect. I am charmed with it. I scarcely recognised my own creation."

"Indeed!" said Mark, with perhaps unnecessary dryness,

He also had studied the grand old Elizabethan fellows, and remembering a line from one of them about "the scorn which patient merit of the unworthy takes," applied it to himself and to Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop.

"I'll try it, dear boy," said Mr. Wilstrop. "I'll give it a fair show, and of course I'll keep my bargain."

With that he drew out a fat pocket-book, and taking care that the young man should see how well lined it was, detached two five-pound notes from the roll it held, and handed them over with an air so generous that the poet's gorge rose at him.

"If you're satisfied," said Mark, "that the work is worth the money ——"

"My dear boy!" cried the manager. "Beside

the immortal thoughts that breathe and words that burn which I find in your work, money is dross. The only thing that troubles me is the excessive smallness of the remuneration. If the piece is a go, dear boy, perhaps we'll make it more. If it isn't, the initial loss is small, and it won't be the first time that it has been my privilege to aid in bringing to light struggling talent. In the present case, dear boy," he added, rising and shaking hands again, "I may say genius. I—may—say—genius," he repeated with a grip of the hand at each word.

It has been remarked that to the poetic pony an ounce of praise is worth ten pounds of corn; and the youthful author, though upon the whole he was not disposed to think highly, either of Mr. Wilstrop's reality or of his judgment,

experienced a pleasurable thrill at these flattering words.

“When do you think,” he asked, “that you will be able to produce the piece?”

“I have arranged for that already,” the manager answered impressively. “The Hutchinson Opera Company has smashed, and I have taken their date here at the Royal in six weeks time from now. I shall have to pay the rent at Lincoln, but that doesn’t matter, as I have not yet engaged the company. So you see, my boy, our piece will have a speedy trial. The parts will be copied out at once and handed over to the company here; so that there will be plenty of time for them to study. We shall play the legitimate for four nights, so that we shall be able to give it at least five rehearsals.”

The young author flushed and paled at this intelligence, and just as the manager ceased to speak a bell tinkled below stairs.

"Is that the signal for your humble meal, dear boy?" asked Mr. Wilstrop, consulting his watch. "I must be getting off towards my own." He shook hands once more with greater effusion than ever, and pulling on the primrose glove with unnecessary elaboration of gesture walked down the stairs with a splendid condescension, and took his leave with a flourish of the hand and a "So long, dear boy! So long!"

The young man had no sooner closed the door behind his retreating figure than he dashed into a room which opened off the little oil-clothed hall, and tearing the two bank notes from his

breast pocket struck a tragedy posture and waved them in the air.

There were three people in the apartment in company with the baked shoulder. Two of them, an elderly grey clean-shaven man and an elderly grey lady with a face of placid sweetness and good humour, rose simultaneously with an immediate copy of his attitude.

The third person present, who might at first sight have been taken for an unusually diminutive and elderly-looking boy, leapt with extraordinary agility into the chair upon which he had been sitting, and standing there with his feet astride and his hands waving in the air emitted a shrill "Hurrah!"

The quartette broke into a laugh and took seats at the table with an everyday aspect, as if this

efflorescence of attitude were commonplace in their experience.

“Juniper,” said the elderly man, sharpening the carving knife upon the carving fork and rising, the better to command the joint, “you’ve lost your halfpenny. Potter it out, my boy. Short debts make long friendships.”

The dwarf produced the coin demanded, and set it upon the table with a bang.

“Juniper made a bet,” said the old lady, who had a voice as agreeable and placid as her face, “that Wilstrop wouldn’t pay the money. Jing’s late,” she continued, turning to her husband. “When you’ve served all round I’ll put the joint back again into the oven and keep it hot for her. I wonder where she can have got to?”

“Oh, Jing’s all right,” the old gentleman

answered cheerily. "She can take care of herself, can Jing. She'll be rare and glad to hear your news, Mark. She's pretty well letter-perfect in the piece already, and thinks no end of it. I know Wilstrop has one of our vacant dates in June, and I'm glad it's coming out here, because we shall have a chance to share in your triumph, my boy."

Mark shook his head rather doubtfully.

"I don't believe much in Wilstrop," he said, "and I don't think he'll put my name to it."

The old man laid down his knife and fork anew, and stared at him. The old lady immediately followed suit, and Juniper brought up the rear with a like demonstration.

"He won't," said Mark. "You'll see, he won't. I did a thousand times more work to the piece than I bargained for. Practically the play's mine :

but that's my look-out, and if he chooses not to acknowledge me I can't help it."

"It'll be a great shame, Mark," said the old lady, "if he hides your name."

"A crying shame," the old gentleman assented warmly. "A wicked shame. I should see him about that if I were you at once. You ought to have made a stipulation with him. Ah, there's Jing. Don't mention that matter before her. She'll only be disturbed about it."

A girl of nineteen, or thereabouts, very pretty and modest-looking, entered the room almost as the old gentleman spoke his last words. She nodded brightly round, and then removing her hat, gloves and mantle, ran off into the kitchen to search for the joint, the whereabouts of which she knew without inquiry.

"We've got great news, Jing," said the old man as she placed the dish before him.

The girl glanced at once at Mark's face, but seeing that he looked unusually serious and even a little gloomy, concluded that the great news did not refer to him.

"Indeed, father!" she said quietly. "What is it?"

"Wilstrop's taken Mark's play," he answered. "He's going to give it a first production here in June. Of course you'll have to play Katie."

The girl's face broke into a beaming smile, and she clasped her hands with a gesture of delight.

"Thank you, Miss Broom," said Mark, half laughing and half blushing. "That's better than a thousand of Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop's speeches."

The girl blushed and drooped her eyes, and took her place at the table in silence.

CHAPTER II.

HERR Karl von Nadli was a member of the Broom household. He lived for the most part a very lonely life there, and as a rule confined himself to his own garret chamber, a meagre little bandbox of a place, from which he occasionally solaced or irritated his neighbours, Juniper and Mark, by the strains of his clarionet. Herr von Nadli played that instrument for a living in the orchestra of the theatre, and played it rather badly.

He was a venerable, and even noble-looking, old gentleman ; and thoughtful people, regarding him as he sat dreaming in the orchestra whilst heroines

wept or ogled, wondered whether his splendid old head were an empty fraud, or, if not, by what strange chance its owner found himself in such low water.

He and Juniper were great chums. Juniper preferred when possible to work at home, his appearance in the street exciting as it did an unwelcome observation.

Everybody about the house had more or less to do with the theatre; and Juniper, whose small fingers had a remarkable dexterity, was engaged as modeller and property maker there.

On a certain morning in June the dwarf was busily at work in his own room when the Herr von Nadli shuffled in, clarionet in hand, and took a seat with his customary wordless nod. The dwarf sat perched at the table, in a child's high chair, squint-

ing carefully at the joined fragments of a purposely broken walking-stick.

"I think that will do," he said.

"So!" said the Herr von Nadli. "Vot is it that you make?"

"It's a trick walking-stick," said Juniper. "On Friday night that's got to be broken over Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop's back. I shouldn't mind having the breaking of it, though if I had I should like to have it whole to begin with. I'd lay it on, you bet!"

He gave a feeble harmless flourish with a fragment of the stick to express the gusto with which the thought inspired him, and immediately fell to work again, delicately trimming the breakage with a sharp penknife.

"Vot," queried the old musician, "has he done to you?"

“Oh he has done nothing to *me*,” said Juniper, “but he’s treated Mark very badly. He’s billed ‘Stolen Splendours’ for Friday night, and he’s stuck his own name down on it. ‘Stolen Splendours,’ by Bonnington Wilstrop. I might as well bring out a bill myself and stick it down by Joshua Juniper Johnston. I had as much to do with it as he had, any way. Everybody in the house knows it is young Mark’s work. If he’d stuck it down Bonnington Wilstrop *and* Mark Stanley I shouldn’t so much ha’ minded. Then there might ha’ been a show of reason. But now—why, it’s simply sickenin’, ain’t it?”

“You tink,” asked the musician, “he is not an honest man?”

“Do I?” said the dwarf. “Don’t I? You ask me what I think of Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop

when Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop's by, and then I'll tell you and take a pleasure in it. He's a low thief, Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop is!"

He seemed to take a savage delight in the pronunciation of the name, and every time he used it he shook it as a terrier shakes a rat.

"Ah, vell," said the old musician, wrinkling his mournful and kindly face. "Ven you shall know the world as I do you shall see that he is not alone. God bless your soul alive, my dear young friend, the world is full. In it tere are all sorts. For myself I am come to be philosopher. Vot is the use, my dear young friend? I shall be kind. I shall be honest. You shall be kind. You shall be honest. Ve leave the other people, who shall be as they must."

"There's that young chap," rejoined the dwarf,

“who’s got more brains in his little finger than Bonnington Wilstrop has in his body, and he goes working like a galley-slave for three months on that blooming play, and he gets ten quid for his trouble and the other chap collars the credit. I don’t want to be philosophical about a thing like that, guv’nor. I’d rather be waxy than I’d be cool about it, any day.”

“You are right,” said Herr von Nadli. “But I am also right. I tire of being angry for other peoples. In my time, my young friend, I have been angry for a whole nation that would not be angry for itself; and now you see I blay the clarionet, ven they vill let me, for twenty-two shillings a week.”

“My inside walls is falling in with hunger,” the dwarf piped. “Here’s dinner-time gone by an hour

and no dinner. Everybody slaving away at rehearsal, of course, to make Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop's fortune. I wish I was a-playin' in the piece. I'd Bonnington Wilstrop him."

"Oho!" said the musician, "what would you do?"

"I'd guy it," said the dwarf. "I'd queer it for him, somehow or other. I'd wreck the bloomin' show, that's what I'd do, guv'nor. Oh, there they are," he cried suddenly, as the bell tinkled below stairs. "I'm off. I'm as hungry as a hunter."

He jumped from his seat, ran to the door, and plunged downstairs, with a clatter surprising for so small a personage; and the musician, still nursing his clarionet, went back to his own apartment.

The table was already spread in the room downstairs, and Mrs. Broom and her daughter

were seated in their walking attire. Mark and the old gentleman were there also, and all were a little flushed with haste and the hot weather.

“Well,” said Juniper abruptly, as he entered, “have you done what I told you? Have you let him have it?”

“No,” said Mark, shaking his head. “I haven’t said a word.”

“You should have made some sort of protest, Mark,” said the elderly actor. “You really ought to have made some sort of protest. I am not a warlike or litigious person myself”—and indeed he looked singularly unlike that—“I have suffered something that I might have avoided if I had been more self-assertive—if I had pushed and shouldered more. But, really, in a case like this, Mark—really—really ——”

He shook his head with a mournful decision, and having by this time served everybody, fell to work upon the cold boiled beef and pickles which formed the staple of the meal.

“What’s the good of it, sir?” Mark asked. “I made a bargain to do certain work for a ten-pound note. I did more than I bargained for, but I did it for my own pleasure and satisfaction. I got lots of useful practice out of it, and, in the long run, I shan’t lose by it.”

“You lose by being robbed, Mark,” said the old lady. “I believe in taking things in a Christian spirit, and I hope I always shall ; but there’s such a thing as being too good. Mr. Wilstrop has not acted well to you.”

“Well,” Mark answered, “the world isn’t full of Mr. Wilstrops. We may do better next time.”

The girl was silent, but she looked at the young fellow with a worshipful devotion in her eyes. It would seem to be an easy thing for a girl of nineteen to persuade herself that in all respects some particular young man is so admirable that he can hardly by any possibility go wrong. Jing had been approaching this conviction with regard to young Mr. Stanley ever since he had taken up his abode in her father's house three years before. It was quite a fixed conclusion with her by this time, and she wondered that everybody did not see as clearly as she herself did, how heroic and philosophical Mark was.

When a girl has made up her mind to admire a young man it is not easy to divert her from her purpose.

Mark's cheerfulness, Mark's heroism, Mark's

philosophy, looked altogether noble ; though it goes without saying that if he had chosen to act in a precisely opposite fashion, and to demand his rights from the man who had so impudently usurped them, she would have admired him just as much in his character of bellicose hero as she did in his other character of philosophical endurer.

Mark knew nothing of the timid worship he excited in her mind, and would have been a good deal surprised to learn the truth about it.

Mamma dimly suspected it, but said nothing, like the discreet old woman she was. She hoped rather vaguely that things would turn out well. Mark was an excellent son, and would no doubt in good time make some girl an excellent husband. Nothing in the world would have pleased Mrs. Broom so much as his proposal for Gingestra's hand.

The simple meal was over. Mark had retired to his own room, Juniper to his, and the old couple had lain down for their customary afternoon doze, when Mr. Wilstrop drove up to the door in a hansom, and paid and discharged the cabman.

Jing, observing his arrival from her post in the window, where she sat knitting and studying her lines at the same time, arose and opened the street door, thus robbing Mr. Wilstrop of the opportunity of arousing the whole neighbourhood by his customary thundering summons. He was radiant in a yachting costume, and had great anchors on his cuffs and collar, and smaller anchors on the gilded buttons of his coat and waistcoat.

There were more anchors on the handkerchief which peeped from his breast pocket, and yet

another for a charm upon his watch-chain. He had been at Scarborough, and had there met one of the gilded youth of England so attired. He was of an imitative turn of mind, and thought the streets of a midland town as fitting for the display of those newly acquired splendours as the promenades of a fashionable watering-place.

“Good-afternoon, my dear!” said Mr. Wilstrop.

He was just old enough to be fatherly and just young enough to make his fatherliness offensive. Jing stood by with her hand upon the door handle, and looked coldly beyond him at the houses opposite.

“Lovely weather!” said Mr. Wilstrop, faintly discomfited, but looking abroad with a sailorly eye.

Still Jing said nothing ; and when Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop looked at her he was forced to see that her silence was wilful.

"I suppose Mr. Stanley is at home?" he said.

"Mr. Stanley is in his room, sir," answered Jing.

"I think you know the way."

Her tone was just as glacial as her look, and though the weather was unusually warm Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop felt disagreeably iced by her manner.

"*I* know the way," he said, nodding and smiling with a forced geniality. "*I* know the way, my dear."

Jing closed the door behind him as he entered, and, with just emphasis enough to mark the sense of his worthlessness, went back to her knitting and her study.

Mr. Wilstrop, smiling for practice all the way, went upstairs, and knocking at the door of Mark's room was admitted by its occupant and subjected to a new refrigeratory process there.

“My object in coming here, dear boy,” he began with an expansive cordiality, “was, in the first place, to propose a little ramble.”

Most people are influenced by their clothes, and the meekest of men is apt to feel warlike if attired in military costume. But with Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop, who was a humbug of the self-deceiving sort to begin with, and an actor of thirty years' standing into the bargain, the clothes he wore were actually decisive both as to manner and to sentiment.

To-day he was jolly Jack all over, and was agreeably sensible that beneath his anchored waistcoat beat the heart of a true British sailor. There was even a faint suggestion of a nautical rollick in his walk. His attitudes and gestures were all of a seafaring sort, and he studied

the mad maps on Mark's discoloured ceiling with a seafaring eye, as if on the look-out for squalls.

"Yes?" said Mark tentatively.

"If you are not otherwise engaged, dear boy," said Mr. Wilstrop. "I should like to have a yarn with you about the piece. I think," he added, "that I see our mutual advantage in it."

"Indeed!" said Mark. "As how?"

"Even at this late hour, dear boy," Mr. Wilstrop replied, "the piece may be susceptible of improvement."

"Do you know," said Mark, "it strikes me that that doesn't concern me much!"

"Ah, dear boy!" cried the manager, taking him by either shoulder and swaying him playfully to and fro. "You undervalue your opportunities.

Now, come!" with a delightful air of candour struggling with itself. "I won't spoil things by talking now, but if the piece *is* a success, dear boy — Well, we won't talk about that now. I say nothing just at present, dear boy," patting Mark confidentially, and with an air of smiling mystery. "But you'll find me true to my word — *nous verrons*, dear boy — *nous verrons*."

Mark was young and was inclined to think that perhaps upon the whole he might have judged the manager too severely. Wilstrop seemed disposed to be not ungrateful, and the least that Mark felt he could do would be to wait and give the manager his chance.

"We'll see how the thing goes, my boy," said that gentleman. "To tell you the truth I'm a little bit afraid of it. It's off the general run and

I'm out of my ordinary line. But come out for a walk, dear boy, and we'll talk it over. You won't find yourself ——" he beamed again, and once more patted Mark on both shoulders. "Let that go for the moment. You'll see when the time comes that I'm as good as my word. Let's take a walk towards Erdington and have a talk. I can show you," he concluded with a secret air, "an excellent glass of ale by the way—Ditcher's Ten-Guinea, dear boy—an amazing stingo!"

Mr. Wilstrop's airs of friendship and confidence had half mollified Mark by this time, and he accepted his companion's invitation almost gaily.

They left the house together and struck out for the Bristol Road, talking vivaciously about the piece, all Mark's authorial interest re-awakened and re-vivified.

“You have done with my idea,” said Mr. Wilstrop, “exactly what any clever fellow might have done with one of the most successful plays of modern times. I’m afraid you’ve gone wrong, dear boy ; I’m afraid you’ve gone wrong. Suppose now, that when Lord Lytton wrote the ‘Lady of Lyons,’ he had been, like myself, a man unaccustomed to the flowery paths of literature. Suppose he had submitted his manuscript to some devilish clever fellow like yourself, dear boy ; and suppose that devilish clever fellow had turned Claude Melnotte into a snob. Now, don’t you see, dear boy ?”

“What else could he have done ?” Mark demanded. “The man’s a howling cad from start to finish.”

“Why, there you are !” cried the manager,

arresting himself in the street. "There you are! If at the start you ticket a character on the stage 'noble,' he'll stop at noble whatever he does. His sentiments and conduct have nothing to do with his character if that's stamped upon him to begin with."

"I don't find that in the big people," Mark answered. "And I don't find it even in the little people who care at all to be true to human nature."

"Human nature be d——d, dear boy," said the manager with energy. "You don't want human nature behind the floats, dear boy. You want to fetch the human nature in front. What I'm afraid of in your piece—our piece—is that your people are not black and white enough."

“ I think,” said Mark, “ that I’ve met such people in the world.”

“ That’s right enough,” said Mr. Wilstrop—
“ but, what the deuce is this? ”

“ This ” was nothing less or more than a little girl of fifteen or thereabouts who sat crying on a doorstep. She was sufficiently well-clad in country fashion, but hatless and crowned with a mass of dishevelled hair of a wonderful golden red.

She sat with her elbows on her knees, her face buried in her hands, and rocked herself to and fro in an apparent complete abandonment to grief, crying unrestrainedly and aloud.

It crossed Mark’s mind at first that the cry had been started because of their arrest, and he thought that the child had been silent and tranquil a second before. But when at the

manager's question she raised her face and looked up with tear-brimmed eyes of an exquisite childish candour, he forgot his suspicions altogether and stooped to speak to her.

"What is the matter, dear?" he asked.

"I'm lost," said the girl, throwing her hands abroad with a vivid gesture, and so began to cry again. "I'm lost!"

"Don't cry," said Mark. "Where do you live?"

The child's reply was at first inaudible, but by-and-by he made out the muffled sobbing murmur to mean Lipton Fields.

"That's seven miles from here," said Mark, "and there's no railway there. How did you come here, my pretty child?"

"I run away," the pretty child responded.

"The best thing you can do," said Mark, "will be to run back again."

"I dussn't," she answered, in the broadest South Staffordshire accent. "My mother-in-law's a regular ripper. Her'd take my hide off if I was to goo whum again."

"Come, come," said Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop, majestically intervening. "The child knows her name. Tell me your name, my child."

"Esther Reddy," said the child.

"And you live," said the manager magisterially, "at Lipton Fields?"

The girl had ceased to cry, and seemed, now that she had enlisted interest, pretty much at ease again.

"That's wheer I live, sir."

"I'll tell you what, dear boy," said Mr. Wilstrop,

arranging his cuffs with a little flourish which might have been natural in a shy man who desired to perform a benevolent action. "We ought to do something for this little waif. Hang it all, you know, dear boy, we don't light upon a child like this, who's seven miles away from home and doesn't know her way back again, and leave her as we found her. D——n it, my dear Stanley, we are not barbarians! We are not Red Indians! We've hearts within our bosoms. Take charge of her, dear boy. Take charge of her."

CHAPTER III.

TO Mark's view Mr. Wilstrop's conclusion was a little unequal to his exordium ; but being by nature rather a harum-scarum fellow, and having a rare good heart of his own, he let that pass and allowed himself at once to be interested in the child's welfare. She was rustic and vulgar enough in all conscience ; but there was no denying the fact that she was sweetly pretty, and in spite of her appalling accent there was something about her speech as well as her person which had in it a promise of refinement if the child were only properly handled. The youthful author's

fancies were always running away with him, and in the turn of a hand he had constructed a castle for this odd sort of fairy princess to live in, and had furnished it from turret to basement.

"Come with me, my child," he said, stooping over her. "I'll see you taken care of until you can be sent home again. What did you say your name was?—Esther?"

"I dussn't goo whum again," said the waif. "I've cotched it twice to-day a'ready. Look here," she said, rolling up the sleeve of her frock, with no embarrassment, and displaying a great green and yellow bruise above the elbow, "that's mother-in-law. Theer's five or six about my back and sho'ders, you see if theer ain't." She rose and began to unbutton a little striped linen jacket

she wore, but Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop raised protesting hands.

"We will take the rest on credit, my girl," he said, and with his own fingers adjusted the one button the child had already detached. "I honour your good heart, dear boy," he added, addressing Mark. "It was like you to suggest it. Mrs. Broom will take care of the child, and you can write. How did you come, my dear," he continued, turning towards her with paternal solicitude, "to be treated in that way?"

"Feyther got his pension yesterday," the waif responded. "He go's on the booze when he gets his pension, feyther does. Then mother her gets the needle and her follows him about with a broomstick. This mornin' feyther gi'n mother a black eye, an' mother her took it out o' me."

"And this," said Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop, raising both hands in the air, "in the midst of our vaunted civilisation—in the nineteenth century of the Christian era!" His voice sunk to an emphatic whisper. "Stanley, dear boy, it's terrible—terrible—terrible!"

"It's pretty bad," said Mark, who was almost as much moved as Mr. Wilstrop pretended to be. "Come with me, my dear. You shan't be ill used again, for one day anyhow."

The child rose, and took unhesitatingly the hand he offered her.

"I'll take her home at once," said Mark.

The manager observed that half a dozen people had gathered about them, and he was already playing to the public, with a well-imagined row of lights between them.

“I applaud you, dear boy,” he said, in a voice which left no doubt of his profession. “I honour you. The small expenses of this act of benevolence ——” here he half recovered from the honest emotion of his heart. “We will talk of that hereafter.”

The spectators, regarding Mark’s faded attire and Mr. Wilstrop’s sartorial glories, put their own construction upon this speech; and a drunken coster who had halted his shallow and his donkey to look on, remarked audibly that the two were of the right sort. The little handful of spectators, led by a carpenter who had a rush basket of tools slung over his shoulder, murmured in approval of this sentiment like a stage chorus.

Mark, holding the child’s hand, led her away; and Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop, saluting the crowd

with the touch of a finger tip to the peak of his yachting cap, sauntered after them, pausing to relight a cigar in a manner subtly expressive of concealed emotion. He did not associate himself too intimately with the tousled child and the somewhat shabby reporter, but followed at their heels with a condescending and protective gait, as if he had taken both of them under a fatherly protection, and was carrying them far from future want and care.

“Tell me all about yourself, my dear,” said Mark, bending over the child and yearning over her somewhat in his simple mind.

Miss Esther Reddy needed no second invitation, but from that moment until their arrival in Bath Row prattled without intermission. The story she had to tell was sordid and brutal, and Mark listened

to her with an aching heart. To be four and twenty and of a tender nature is to be easily made sad and for the moment bitter. The paternal Reddy, so it appeared, had been a soldier, and had fought at the Alma and at Inkermann. The child knew the names of those great actions, and had an evident pride in her father's share in them. He had been discharged, it seemed—invalided before the close of the war—and had a pension for life of one and threepence per diem. The little narrator of the story had no memory of her mother, but she knew that her father's second wife had been a servant in the big house at Lipton Fields.

What she knew she told without shyness, and becoming animated over the recital, grew to look exceedingly pretty and attractive. Mark, who carried his researches into all manner of queer

corners, had lately been wrestling with the works of Monsieur Desbarolles and had become something of an expert in chiromancy, so that he had attained a knack of studying the hands of new acquaintances.

The child's disengaged hand, which fluttered butterfly-like everywhere in lively gesture as she spoke, was purely psychic in form. It was brown and dirty, and the pretty little pink nails were utterly neglected ; but in itself the hand was unalterably beautiful, and seemed to his fancy to bespeak a refinement far removed from the child's obvious station. Mark examined the little hand he held imprisoned in his own as he listened.

The heart-wounding prattle went on, telling how father drank and how mother drank, and how the two fought with each other, and how Mr. This and

Mrs. That intervened in the family disturbances. Papa, it seemed, had been in prison for assaulting mamma, and had had six months of it, during which there was nothing but the pension to support the expenses of the household. Then mamma had been in prison for assaulting papa, and times were better because the ex-dragoon went to work in the intervals of drinking.

All this in the sweet childish voice, unobscured by the execrable accent, and rendered more poignant by the narrator's innocent and childish looks, touched the susceptible young man of letters very nearly. He had burdens enough upon his back already, and had no hesitation whatever in assuming this one more, though what a bachelor of his years was to do with a female child of fifteen was a little uncertain to him.

By the time Mark reached home, the old lady had got her afternoon nap over, and was quietly busy about her household affairs. She received the new charge with a mild astonishment, but had not the faintest idea of resisting her lodger's will in the matter. It was decided that at all events the child should be accommodated until something could be heard from her father and stepmother. Jing took instant charge of her, and submitted her to an ordeal of soap and water, which was endured with something very like despair, Miss Reddy appearing to suppose that in running away from home she had finally escaped that trial.

The old lady looked on at the operation, and when in the course of it the shins of the patient Jing were kicked, she fell upon the rebel little runaway with unexpected decision and soundly

boxed her ears. This brought the girl to reason, and kept her docile for an hour or two.

When she was washed and her luxuriant and really beautiful hair was combed, she certainly looked remarkably attractive. She was freckled and sunburnt, but her skin was by nature singularly fine and pure, and altogether if she had been properly cared for she would have been an unusually beautiful child. Her eyes were her great feature. Whether she had a soul or no was a thing yet to be decided; but the eyes, which were of an intense deep blue, looked full of intelligence and feeling.

But for them her beauty would have been rather babyish or even doll-like, but they seemed to give expression and animation to her whole countenance. She had no shyness, and told her tale to

Mrs. Broom and Jing as freely as she had told it to Mark, and more than once in the course of her story used epithets which made both the young woman and the old one shiver.

“The child’s a perfect savage, Jing, dear,” said Mrs. Broom in after confidence with her daughter. “If Mr. Stanley has made up his mind to keep her we must do our best for her, though what the poor young man wants to put his shoulders under such a burden as that for I can’t understand.”

Mark himself put in an appearance at this moment.

“I got the address of the child’s father as I came along, and I’ve written this,” he said, holding up a letter. “John Reddy, Bennett’s Row, Lipton Fields. I’ve told the fellow where his daughter

is, and I suppose he'll come to fetch her home."

It appeared that the new importation had been listening, for at this speech she burst into the room declaring that she never would go home again.

"You'll just do what you've got to do," said the old lady. "I can see that you're a very naughty child, miss, and that you've been very badly brought up."

"Thee be'st one o' the sort as sees a lot wi' both eyes shut," said miss, in a tone of angry satire. "I shan't go whum agen. That's flat. Yo' can like it or lump it, walk it or stump it, just as yo' please."

Mark exploded in a great laugh at this, but the old lady looked inexpressibly shocked and grieved.

“O Mark !” she cried, “Mark, my dear, you mustn’t laugh at such wickedness.”

Mark strove to look grave, but a twinkle in his eye betrayed him, and the little baggage instantly took shelter behind his ægis.

“Go and post your letter, Mark,” said Mrs. Broom.

“Don’t you do nothin’ o’ the sort, Mark,” said the child, with perfect decision and familiarity. “It’s no use yo’ writin’ to feyther. He’ll niver come a-nigh me, and I shall niver go a-nigh him agen if I can help it.”

“A lovely future that infant has got before her !” said Mark.

He made a move towards the door ; but the girl seized him by the arm, and clung to him, with a face suddenly wreathed with smiles and full of a coaxing and caressing persuasion.

"I'll be good if yo' was to let me stay here, I would. Hangy-bangy, cut my throat if I wouldn't ! I wouldn't cheek nobody—not even th' ode 'ooman."

"Ah," Mark answered, looking down at her, "you would develop into a model of propriety in a moment, I am quite sure, if you only had your way. But there is one little thing you have to learn, and I am afraid it will take you a little trouble to learn it. You're not the only live person in the world, and there are really other people to be considered."

The child's face fell, and she looked at once sulky and confounded. The tone of grave banter was evidently new to her, and both perplexed and hurt her. It had the one good effect of leaving her quiet for the moment, and she allowed Mark

to go out and post his letter without further protest.

The epistle bore fruit next morning, when, by a rare chance, Mark was at home at noonday. He had been down to the office of his journal, and finding no appointment marked for him before eight o'clock in the evening, had gone back to his lodgings to devote himself to his own special labours. He had already settled down to write, when he was uninterestedly aware of a knock at the door; but by-and-by voices raised high in anger woke him from his fancies, and he ran hastily downstairs to see what might be the matter.

There, in the hall, was a soldierly-looking handsome fellow, a little bloused by habits of drinking, and a thin, little, pinched-up shrew of a woman, with a high-pitched voice, who talked at railway

speed, and only talked the louder for the fact that nobody listened to her.

There was Mrs. Broom, holding back the old gentleman, who apparently desired to eject the intruders from the house; and there was Jing, with a white face and clasped hands, looking on with an aspect of terror.

Herr von Nadli had apparently just entered, for he stood near the door, with his hat in one hand and the shabby single old glove he always wore in the streets dangling between his thumb and finger. His clarionet in its crumpled leather case was tucked away under one armpit, and he gave a serious attention to the scene.

Juniper was there also in a condition of extreme excitement, standing between his landlord and the male stranger, and, if his attitude and expression

were to be trusted, ready to brave a world in arms.

Jing and the musician were the only silent members of the party. Everybody else was talking, and Mark stood there for a minute or two before he could learn anything from the universal hubbub.

Then it appeared that the soldierly-looking man was the waif's father, and the pinched-up little shrew of a woman was her stepmother. The man had, early as it was, taken a good deal more to drink than was good for him, and had opened the conversation by a show of gratitude so drunkenly effusive that his wife had taken umbrage at it, and had started upon the directly opposite tack, demanding to know why the child had not been instantly returned, and by what right, moral or legal, her

natural guardians had been left in suspense all night.

To everybody's great astonishment, the husband had veered round to this view, and had begun to take off his coat, with the expressed intention of taking it out of somebody.

On this position of affairs, Mark made his appearance, and set himself to work to restore order.

The ex-dragon was very drunk indeed, but he could still see that the new-comer looked active, stalwart, and determined, and his pugnacious fires were cooled a little.

"That," he said, lurching at the door of the little front room and waving a hand towards the child, who sat apparently unconcerned, swinging her feet to and fro beneath her chair, "that's my own flesh and blood. Look arrit! Now just look arrit.

That's the third time she's run away from home, and I've licked her every time. I've done my duty as a father by her, and I've licked her every time. I shall be hanged for that kid one of these days," he added, with a sudden plaintiveness which almost melted into tears. "And where's the good of it? I get no respect and I get no affection. That's hard upon a man, ladies and gentlemen,—a man who's fought and bled for his native country, and then has no respect and affection from his only child. You don't know how hard it is until you try it."

Here he began to weep and to bemoan himself, saying that he wished himself dead—an aspiration in which his wife joined audibly with great seeming heartiness.

"Now you know," said Mark gravely, "that

you're not in a fit state at present to be trusted with the child."

The woman, with great fierceness and volubility, demanded to know who *he* was, that he should come in between people and their own flesh and blood, and having talked herself into a tearing passion, made a sudden dash at the runaway. This was the beginning of an appalling tumult. The child had cause to scream, but she shrieked beyond all warrant. The woman screamed, belabouring her. Jing cried in terror at the scene, and the rest all shouted together, tugging the combatants apart.

"You ever come home again," shrieked the infuriated woman, "and I'll be the death o' you."

"Come," said Mark, who was white with anger and excitement. "It's time to put an end to

this. If you people are not quiet I will call in the police and give you both in charge. You are no more fit to have control of a Christian child than if you were a brace of savages. That's evident enough."

"And who is fit to take care of a child if we're not?" the woman shrieked at him across the little intervening crowd.

"I will take care of the child," said Mark. "Leave her to me, and go and drink and fight out your worthless lives together, the pair of you."

The woman went suddenly quiet, and turning to her husband took him by the arm.

"Come along, Jack," she said. "That's a good riddance of bad rubbish, anyway. I'd like your name, if you please, young man; and yours, if you

please, mum ; and yours, if you please, sir. We're Christian people if we're not fit to take care of a Christian child, and we'd like to know who we're a-leaving her with."

"That gives you my landlord's name and mine," said Mark, drawing an envelope from his pocket and giving it to her. "That's my office address," he added, handing her a card. "And now you know all about me and can go."

They went with so little further trouble that everybody was amazed. The contract was finished ; and a young bachelor of four and twenty had a girl child of fifteen upon his hands almost before he knew it. Jing admired him for this impulsive piece of madness as much as she admired him for anything, but the others were a little dubious.

"You can't afford it, Mark," said the old lady. "It's a serious thing. It's a very unexpected thing, my dear. We'll do our best together, but ——"

"No," said Mark, "the thing's my doing. I took the responsibility and I'll keep it. I won't have anybody else burdened with it."

There was a friendly squabble about this, but he stood firm.

"The child has nothing," said the old lady, "but what she stands upright in."

"I've got a pound or two," Mark answered—a little ruefully perhaps, but quite unshaken. "You'll buy what she wants, Mrs. Broom? You'll do it cheaper than I could, and besides that you know better."

He stooped down and kissed the child; and she, suddenly bursting into sobs, threw her arms about

his neck and clung to him. He disengaged himself in a little while, and saying that he had his work to see to, went upstairs. In his own room he unlocked a little drawer, and there counted out fifty-seven shillings from a pill-box, which, though small even for a pill-box, was big enough to hold every coin he had in the world.

“Two pounds a week,” he said, “and out of that a pound to mother.” He took up a pipe from the mantel-piece, and having regarded it with a lingering air, threw it into the fire-place. “You’ll have to go. That’s two shillings a week saved, pretty nearly. Knock off the beer at meals. That means fourpence a day. Call it four shillings a week. Will she eat more than that, I wonder? There are boots and clothes to come from somewhere. We’ll see ; I daresay I can manage it.”

CHAPTER IV.

THE introduction of Miss Esther Reddy into the quiet and orderly household in Bath Row was like the bringing of a monkey into a conventicle. The wheels of life, which ordinarily went so smoothly and with such well-regulated tranquil precision, were thrown out of gear, and seemed to whir wildly in wrong directions. The imported plague was upstairs and downstairs and in the old lady's chamber all at once. There was not a room of the house which was safe from her presence unless it chanced to be locked. Any small trifle about the place which took her

fancy she instantly appropriated, and if questioned about it she lied with so much serenity and such an air of innocent surprise that it was almost impossible not to believe her. She performed a score of acts of witting and unwitting mischief, and was no more repentant for the one sort than she was for the other. She had an extraordinary passion for climbing, and brought poor Mrs. Broom's heart into her mouth on the very first afternoon, by presenting herself on the parapet of the house and walking there, with a house-brush for a balancing pole, in imitation of a rope dancer she had somewhere seen. She repeated the same feat upon the party wall, which was ten feet high, and to her great delight was made less safe to the foot-hold by having rounded bricks at the top. If by chance she hurt herself, as she not uncommonly

did, she roused the neighbourhood with piercing screams, so that in the course of a week at the outside she had become notorious.

With all this, she had, when she chose, ways so winning and caressing that there were moments when each of the inhabitants of the house in turn was quite in love with her. She seemed to be without the faintest touch of shyness, and had a hundred quaint and old-fashioned ways of displaying her momentary fondnesses which were drolly and delightfully charming.

Mimicry seemed to be the one supreme pleasure of her life; and she mocked everything and everybody with so absurd a veracity of voice, face, gesture, and figure that it was impossible not to be amused by her. She was a prodigious chatterbox, and related her own small experiences half the day

long, embellishing them with a life-like mimicry of the people she brought into her story. Mrs. Broom was constrained to laugh at her, and to admit that she was better than the play.

The child had not been an hour in the house when the sound of Herr von Nadli's clarionet drew her upstairs. She marched fearlessly into his room, as if she had a right to be there, and posing herself against the door with her hands folded behind her, stood there to listen. The Herr went on with his practice with distended cheeks and rather staring eyes, so that he made a quaint figure for her observation. When she had regarded him for awhile the little hussy sank into a sitting posture against the door-jamb and began to finger an imaginary clarionet, with cheeks blown out in ludicrous imitation of the player. The satire

looked so unconscious that it was robbed of insolence ; and the musician, stopping short in his tune and lowering his instrument, looked at her with a good-humoured smile.

“So,” he said, “you are going to shtob here?”

“I’m goin’ to do what here?” said Esther.

“Going to shtob here,” Herr von Nadli repeated.

“What do you say ‘shtob’ for?” she asked.

“Ah,” said the old man, “you are very young. You should not yet ask questions. And you should know that you speak very ill yourself, then you will not try to correct your elders.”

“Yo’ll niver catch me sayin’ ‘shtob,’” the child answered, unabashed.

“Oh,” cried the musician, lifting both hands in a humorous pretended dismay, “vot an ugly, vot

a dreadful, vot a fulgar accent! I am a foreigner, dear child, and to laugh at me is foolish. But you—you are a little English voman, and your own language is a great deal worse as mine.”

“I’m sure it eeat,” said the child.

“Eat?” repeated the old musician. “Vot is that for a vord? Does it mean ‘is not’? You must learn your own language, little girl.”

Esther looked vexed and a little bewildered, but after a moment she turned abruptly and walked out of the room. She was subdued for perhaps five minutes, but at the end of that time began those researches which ended in her being discovered on the parapet. It became evident next morning that Herr von Nadli’s philological lesson had not been wasted upon her, for she seized Mark after breakfast and dragged him coaxingly into the back-yard.

It was one of this young lady's peculiarities to be perfectly familiar and intimate in five minutes with anybody whom she might encounter. She addressed Mark by his Christian name, and clung to him, and coaxed him as confidently as if she had known him all her lifetime. Having once wheedled him away from the rest she began to tell him that there was an "old foreign bloke" in the house who had reproached her English, and had told her there was no such word as "eeat".

"But there is, Mark, isn't there?"

"No, my dear," said Mark. "There is not."

"There is not?" Esther repeated gravely.

"O.K., I shall never say that again."

"I shall never say that again," Mark repeated.

She cast a keen glance at him, and he could see by the motion of her lips that she was imitat-

ing his pronunciation of the phrase below her breath. She walked away thoughtfully, and it was noticeable that from that hour she would stop even in her wildest bursts of naughtiness to listen to Mark's talk, until in a while she had caught his trick of speech and something of his accent. Her own native fashions were too deeply rooted in her to be changed in a day or two, or even in a month or two ; but she managed to veneer and varnish them with surprising rapidity, and was notably ashamed when the veneer cracked, as it pretty constantly did.

She had not been long in the house before she discovered that she was in the midst of people who were associated with the theatre. This made a great impression upon her mind, for she had once been privileged to witness the pantomime of

Aladdin. The theatre was a place of actual enchantment to her, and all who were concerned in it were kings and queens to her imagination.

On the night of the first performance of "Stolen Splendours" there was not a soul left in the house to take care of the child, and she was perforce placed under the care of Juniper, who had a free seat in the pit and found no difficulty in introducing his companion. The lights, the crowd, the music, the decorations of the house, the very scene painted on the front cloth, all moved her strongly, and she sat in a high-strung quiet and expectation. When at length the curtain rose on the preliminary farce she was bitterly disappointed to find the performers arrayed in modern costume.

"Why, Juniper," she said, "it is not like a theatre a bit. They're only men and women."

She spoke in her natural voice, and there was some laughter, followed by angry cries of "Order," at which she sank abashed into herself. She soon began to take an intelligent interest in the performance; and when the low comedy footman sat upon the band-box, it was her shriek of delighted laughter that led on the house.

Mark was there, seated in the dress-circle, a little pale and excited, as was only natural. He had a pretty hand for dramatic criticism, and was occasionally entrusted to represent his journal in that way. He had found himself assigned to the work that evening, and had been too shy to tell his chief of his own connection with the piece. He wished now that he had been bolder, for the public criticism of his own handiwork began to look like an impertinence and a dishonesty.

When the farce was over, Juniper stood up in the pit to look for Mark ; and having found him, nodded with a jubilant air to give him encouragement.

The five minutes' interval made an awful time for Mark, and his heart knocked at his ribs as if it were eager to escape from its prison, and would fain batter down the walls. He made shift, somehow, to leave his seat, and to get away to the refreshment room for a glass of brandy.

There he met his colleague from the rival journal, who contrived to shake his already disturbed nerves more than a little.

"We shall hear the bird to-night if we never did before," he said.

"The bird?" said Mark, with a bewildered air.

"The goose," returned the other. "The bird of ill omen. They'll hiss the roof off."

"Why should they?" Mark demanded.

"Wait and see," said his colleague; "it'll be the greatest lark you ever saw. I've just heard that 'Stolen Splendours' is a cooked-up version of an extraordinary piece of rubbish that Wilstrop called 'The Rightful Heir' two years ago. He wasn't allowed to use the title. He gave me the piece to read, and I give you my word that I never saw anything like it. It was just about as lifelike as a wax-work show in a country fair. He'd got a death-scene for his hero in the third act that made me laugh until I cried. It was as funny as 'Pyramus and Thisbe'."

The local stage-manager stood by, portly and rubicund, caressing his great moustaches.

"Don't you believe it, Stanley," he said. "It'll knock 'em as high as a kite. I saw the old scrip, and I've watched the rehearsals here. You never saw such a change in your life. The whole thing is turned inside out. There's money in it now—and lots of it." He laid a coin upon the counter and tapped it with his forefinger. "Do you see that? That's a quid, isn't it? I'll bet you that, that the piece is a go, and a screaming good go into the bargain."

"Not taken," said the other. "We shall see. There's the bell."

The two hurried in and took their seats apart from one another in the crowded circle. The curtain was in the act of rising, and Jing was on the stage already, culling flowers to form a bouquet, and soliloquising about her expected lover.

Thirty seconds earlier she had been trembling and half sick with terror at the wings ; but the stage fright was over now, and she spoke her lines with a sweet vivacity which pleased the house at once. She was in a summer dress of sprigged muslin, and wore a straw hat and garden gloves. Mark noticed, almost for the first time, how pretty she looked, and with what a modest, natural grace she moved. There stood his warm-hearted, sweet little heroine to the life. He had been wholly in love with the character whilst he had drawn it ; and now, for the moment, he was half in love with Jing, as its interpreter. Presently on came Mrs. Broom, a grandmotherly, fussy old lady, excellently presented after the old-fashioned style. Then Mr. Broom, an oily scoundrel of an old lawyer, smooth, voluble,

persuasive. He was an old-established favourite, and all his points told. The house began to laugh and sparkle, and the anonymous dramatist's heart beat with a feverish exultation. Then came on the lover, and the plot began to unroll itself swiftly and smoothly. The wicked adventuress appeared in the person of Miss Carrington, and the story strung itself at once to an intense interest. The first act was half over before Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop presented himself to the audience in pink, buff tops and white breeches. Mark groaned aloud ; for there was summer time boldly proclaimed in all the landscape, and there was the heroine in white muslin, and she had been culling flowers not twenty minutes back. Somehow, the audience let the anachronism go ; but Mr. Bonnington

Wilstrop had all the ancient methods, and in spite of the pink and the tops could not forget the crook-back king. At times, in the midst of high-comedy dialogue, his tones and action were reminiscent of "Hear it not, Duncan". How the poor dramatist loathed and hated him! How he sweated at the ranting voice and stagey stride! How all life, truth and delicacy seemed to wither out of the character under that pelting style!

The house thought otherwise. Mark was the only man who knew his own intention, and the rest saw a creation natural and plausible enough, burlesqued perhaps to the limit of the reasonable, but not beyond. They saw, in fact, an admirable representation of what Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop would himself have been in the circumstances

depicted in the story, and found in him a truth to nature of a sort. He was an eminently amusing rascal, with his overdone airs of John Bull virtue, and before the finish of the act the audience had taken to him hugely.

The curtain fell on a strong situation, and the applause was loud and long. Mark's fervour went quite calm upon a sudden. All his doubts had centred round the first act. He had no claim either to the honours or the profits of his work, but he felt himself a made man for all that. There was more where that piece of work had come from, and the public verdict told him that his modest confidence in himself was not misplaced. Nobody to whom the applause of a packed house is not addressed can hear the real music in its thunder. It gladdened the young

man's heart and set his head on fire like wine.

He made his way out of the circle and on to the stage, being known and readily passed by the box-keeper. Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop received him somewhat boisterously.

"It goes, dear boy! It goes! I was trembling for it a quarter of an hour ago. There's one touch-and-go spot in it, but we're over that. We shall ramp through the rest like old boots, my boy."

The call-boy's appearance put an end to the interview. The actor-manager gave the word, the curtain went up, and Mark stood to watch the progress of the second act from the wings. If he had guessed how much he was adding to the burden of his own anxieties by staying there, he would have gone back to his old place in the circle.

The mere fact of being on his feet, and the other fact that he was free of the observation of his neighbours, seemed to let loose the natural excitement which began once more to heave and surge in his mind. The voices on the stage sounded forced and unreal in his ears. He saw the paint and powder too closely, and live eyes seemed to look out of dead faces at him, when by hazard he caught the glances of the players. Everything was exaggerated, even the pauses between the words, which had at least the stage semblance to nature for those in front. Time grew longer. The whole thing seemed to drag incredibly; and when Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop, in accordance with the business of the scene, began to laugh, Mark thought that he would never finish.

Jing made a pleasant contrast to the others. She had a fresh bright voice, and used it naturally. The rest were all old stagers, and had the clockwork regularity, the ponderous consonants and too open vowels of their schools. Jing belonged to the newer order, who go to Nature for their models, and she made it her business to act upon the stage exactly as she thought she would have acted off it, if the real conditions had been equal with those invented for her. This sounds as if it were easy, but it is in fact the most difficult of all forms of art, and is the highest and the truest. She had not much to do just then, but what she did pleased the excited and nervous author to the quick. The bright voice and natural manner seemed to carry sunshine with them.

She came tripping from the brilliantly lighted stage with a silvery peal of laughter, as natural as the warbling of a bird, followed by the false mirth of those she left behind upon the scene. Mark stood in comparative gloom on the wing side of a large set-piece, and she almost ran into his arms. She saved herself in time, and the laughing face she had carried away with her changed instantly to a blushing shyness. Mark, accustomed to the half gloom, could see her quite clearly. She was in evening dress, with bare arms and shoulders ; and for the second time that night he thought how very pretty she really was. He had been living now in the same house with Jing for nearly three years, and somehow or other her charms had escaped him until that evening. The poverty of his living had given a cold austerity to

his blood, not altogether natural or wholesome in a man of his years. The typical woman charmed his imagination; but the real, living, breathing creature had had no existence for him. The bashful, pleasing face and graceful figure touched him for the first time in his experience, as they would have touched ninety-nine natural young men in a hundred. No more than that, but in the high-strung excitement of the hour that was enough to lend an accustomed glow and colour to his thoughts.

“I fancied you were in front, Mr. Stanley,” said Jing, after what she felt to be an awkward pause.

Now, with all respect to Jing, who was an eminently truthful young person as a rule, this was a fib. She had been looking for the young man

about the house whenever the business of her part gave her a chance, and had been fearing that his nervousness had driven him away. But she had her excuses. It was absolutely necessary to say something, and she could think of nothing else to say.

"I have been looking on from here through the whole of this act," said Mark. "It seems to go well with the house."

"Splendidly!" she cried with enthusiasm.

"It seems almost all wrong to me," he said with a subdued irritation.

"Oh, pray don't say that, Mr. Stanley," she answered in a wounded voice.

"And pray don't take it to yourself, Miss Broom," he said, more warmly than he knew. "You were never a twentieth part so good. I

mightn't have known how bad some of the rest were but for you."

At this Jing blushed and beamed.

"You are really, really pleased, Mr. Stanley?"

She held out both hands in a natural gesture of appeal, and Mark took them in his own and shook them cordially.

"More than pleased, Miss Broom—delighted."

Then the young man, who had never done anything of that sort in his life before, was dreadfully discomfited; and the girl noticing this in half a second, as people of a sensitive nature will, felt her first shyness doubled. The pair of them stood there as if they had been suddenly caught in some act of baseness; and though both longed to put an end to the interview, neither of them knew how to do it.

Two people came with stealthy footsteps round the corner of the set-piece, and in a moment were recognised as Juniper and Esther.

“You’re here, Mark !” cried the sprite, dashing at him and dancing in an ecstasy of pleasure and excitement as she took him by the sleeve. “So am I.”

CHAPTER V.

THE comedy was over, and had proved beyond doubt successful. At the final fall of the curtain there had been a great outburst of enthusiasm, and the theatre had resounded with cries for the author. Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop responded, and Mark lurked in the wings behind him with a heart as bitter as gall. For one second he had hoped that Wilstrop would have taken him by the hand and would have invited him at least to share the honours which were wholly his by right. He had made his bargain and must needs abide by it; but nobody will think it unnatural in the young man

if he felt that he was being basely treated, and was for the moment passionately resentful.

The curtain, which had been drawn aside for the actor-manager to pass, still hung aslant a little, and Mark could see him beaming and bowing right and left with his hand upon his heart.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Mr. Wilstrop, when the noise of applause at length subsided, "I thank you from my heart for this flattering, this magnificent reception of my work. I own that I was not without a humble pride in it before I ventured to produce it. It has received now the sanction and the seal of an audience second to none in this kingdom in experience and intelligence, and, ladies and gentlemen, I am proud and satisfied indeed. Again and again from my heart of hearts I thank you."

He bowed once more amidst renewed applause, and gracefully withdrew himself from the public view. Mark stood lowering at him from the wings; and Mr. Wilstrop had a little difficulty in encountering his young friend's eye, which burned with so gloomy and scornful a fire that it took a good deal of effrontery to meet it at all.

"You'll come in and wait whilst I dress, won't you, dear boy?" he cried, clapping Mark upon the shoulder with an overdone boisterous geniality. "We must have an hour or two together after this."

Mark went cool again, and followed the manager with a sense of humour in his mind gnawing and splenetic—a little harder to bear, if anything, than the hot rage of a minute earlier.

“This man’s a study,” he said to himself. “I must teach myself to like him. It’s one of the *bêtises* of criticism that you can’t really understand a man without loving him. I shall never get to love you, Bonnington Wilstrop; but I may learn to know you, and one of these days you may come in useful.”

Wilstop was not altogether at his ease; but he had to remove the grease paint from his face, and to make his toilet for the streets, and he was thus able to cover all traces of confusion.

“We’ll give ourselves a good time, dear boy,” he cried, with a more than ordinary unction of voice and manner. “We’ll take a little bit of supper at the club, and we’ll have a bottle of the best. It’s a poor heart,” he added benevolently, “that never rejoices.”

Mark waited in perfect quiet until the business of dressing was over.

"You don't want your man any more," he asked then, "do you?"

"No, dear boy," said Wilstrop, with his overdone air of surprise.

"I should like to speak a private word with you," Mark said. "You may go, Webster. Good-night."

The dresser withdrew with a respectful salutation, and Mr. Wilstrop clipped the founder of his fortunes by both shoulders in his own warm-hearted, amiable fashion, and spoke as if he were willing to surrender provinces out of the mere goodness of his soul.

"Now, dear boy, what is it?"

"You made your bargain," said Mark, "and I

made mine. We agreed for certain work to be done for a certain sum. You paid, and I have nothing to grumble at."

"Why, precisely so," said Mr. Wilstrop, with an embarrassed air.

"And when the piece made a hit it was you who had the humble pride in it, and it was your work on which public approval set its seal and sanction?"

"Why, precisely so, dear boy," said Mr. Wilstrop. "The position was forced on me. I couldn't refuse to accept an unanimous call like that. My name was on the bills. There was no stipulation."

"No," said Mark. "There was no stipulation. You have absolute right on your side. You don't seem quite to understand me, Mr. Wilstrop.

It occurred to me that I should like to tell you that you have acted in perfect accordance with your bargain."

"I'm delighted to hear you say so, dear boy," said Mr. Wilstrop, and shook hands with him to cover a momentary confusion. "I can assure you, Stanley, that there is not a man alive who can say that Bonnington Wilstrop ever broke the strict letter of a written agreement."

"I conceive as much," said Mark, with considerable dryness.

"I am sure," said Wilstrop, struggling with unnecessary vehemence into a light overcoat, "that I have every reason so far to be satisfied with the bargain. The verdict of a first night audience is very often deceptive. In the provinces, dear boy, it's especially deceptive. A provincial audience is

a bit flattered at a first appeal being made to its judgment. But another provincial audience may be a bit jealous, don't you see?—and Manchester may upset next Friday what Birmingham approves to-night. But if the thing turns out what I hope for—well, dear boy, I hate to make promises which after all may have no binding force — we'll see. Perhaps you may have as much reason to be satisfied as I seem to have. We'll say no more about it just at present. Let's go to the club.'

"I have my notice to write," Mark answered. "I'll join you there when I've done."

"Good, dear boy," said the manager; and so took his arm and swaggered off with him, shaking hands with fervour at the door of Mark's office,

and beseeching him to come down as soon as his work was over.

Mark wrote his notice, dealing rather coldly and stiffly with the merits of the piece, and confining himself principally to a criticism of its interpretation. He gave half a dozen lines of warm praise to Jing, and did what was requisite and conventional for those capable and worthy old people, her father and mother. As for Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop, he tried hard to do him justice, and was a little warmer than he might have been if he had been inwardly less cold.

“You have done already?” cried the manager, as the critic walked into the club some three-quarters of an hour after their parting. “A new production, dear boy, I should have thought you

would have done more than that. . Ah, I see.” He lowered his voice to a confidential whisper. “You knew the piece and were able to write beforehand.”

Mark gave no denial to this supposition, and the meal being shortly served they sat down to eat and drink with each other under the shelter of a screen which Mr. Wilstrop had himself requested the waiter to set up for the better security of his privacy. Now, Mr. Wilstrop was only an honorary member of the club, and enjoyed its privileges without consideration during his stay in the town. He had taken exclusive and patronising airs there, and there was already a clique of young journalists and artists who were ready to resent his pretensions. To them the erection of the screen was the straw that broke the back of Patience.

They gathered in a knot and plotted in whispers, when suddenly burst in one Broad, a rotund little Yorkshireman, with a bald head and a red face of fatuous cunning and self-importance. Mr. Broad was the alternate bore and butt of society, and had a finely cultivated faculty for the discovery of mares' nests. He was always rushing in upon his acquaintances with the news of some prodigious discovery ; and the fact that he had been hoaxed twenty times in a day already never saved him from being hoaxed on the twenty-first occasion of experiment. He was in a mighty pucker now, and in haste to deliver himself of some weighty secret.

" Ah say, boys," he cried, before he had fairly got the doors open. " Ah've got a startlin' bit o' news for you this time."

There was a chorus of indignant, weary protest from the small crowd assembled in the room.

“Has anybody here seen old Bonnington Wilstrop’s new piece at the Royal to-night?”

The query promised something, and looked as if it might be turned to serve the general purpose,—electric signs passed round, smiles and other facial hints which were lost upon the eager Broad. Mr. Wilstrop in his place behind the screen looked complacently at Mark, and gave a little sideways swagger of the head, as much as to say that this eager mention of his name was something of a compliment.

“Everybody’s been there,” said one of Mr. Broad’s auditors. “What about it?”

The bald-headed little bore was half astounded at his own good fortune ; people were positively going to listen to him.

“ Ah’ve got the whole history of it,” he declared. “ Ah’ve just been drinking a glass o’ beer with old Broom, th’ actor, at the Woodman. Ah’m rather an abstemious man as a general rule, but ah don’t mind taking a glass o’ beer now and then if a gentleman invites me to it.”

“ We don’t want a disquisition on your personal tastes and habits, Broad,” said the man who had addressed him before. “ The play’s the thing. What about it ? ”

“ This about it,” said Broad, thinking to let off a cracker of considerable dimensions, but actually exploding a bombshell. “ Ah’m told that old Bonnington Wilstrop never wrote a line of it.”

This announcement went so far beyond the popular expectation that the men were dumb. The object of the libel went suddenly pale and rigid, and stared before him with a ghastly look. Mark flushed to the roots of his hair, and every nerve in his body seemed to tingle like an electric bell, but he kept his place in silence.

“But who did write it if Bonnington Wilstrop didn’t?” somebody asked.

“Nah, look here,” said Mr. Broad. “Ah’ve got it all upon the best authority. The piece was written in the house of the gentleman ah’ve been talking to. He’s had every sheet of the manuscript through his hands. He’s a well-known member of the theatrical profession himself, though I myself was never brought up to

think very highly of theatres and actors, and especially actresses."

"Your opinions on these themes, Broad," said the man who had first addressed him, "are a treasure to be coveted, but we'll take them at another time. You know that you're bringing a very serious accusation against a public man. Let me ask you, sir, are you so certain of the truth of the charge you bring that you would prefer it in the presence of the person you incriminate?"

Mr. Broad, who when out of danger knew no fear, responded in the affirmative.

"Well, now then," said the other. "I demand a categorical answer to a single question. If Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop didn't write the piece, who did?"

"Young Stanley," answered Broad. "Mark Stanley."

This second bombshell seemed to explode with wider havoc than the first. One of the listeners, bolder than the rest, strode with a cigar in his mouth and his hands in his pockets to the end of the room, and there pretended to study an engraving, whilst he shot an occasional furtive look at the two men behind the screen. He saw that the eminent actor was livid, but of Mark's attitude and expression he could make nothing. The spy strode back again in a silence in which the creaking of his shoes was audible.

"Mark Stanley was in the house to-night," said one. "If the piece is his why doesn't he claim it?"

“That’s no business of mine,” said Mr. Broad. “All ah know is Mark wrote the piece, sir. Ah don’t know where he found the brains to do it, for he’s a sillyish kind o’ chap, to my fancy. We’ve been in the reporters’ room together by ourselves sometimes talkin’ as serious as you please, and all of a sudden he’d laugh like a horse. Ah don’t suppose I ever had a talk with him in my life without his doin’ that.”

“That is Mark’s failing,” said a lank, grave man, who had not hitherto spoken. “His sense of humour is stronger than his self-control.”

The clubmen assembled were a sufficiently amiable and genial set, and were guilty of nothing vindictive in leading on Mr. Broad to the expression of his opinions. But one of them, boiling over with internal mischief, demanded of him, with

a grave face and in a solemn, minatory tone, what he thought of Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop if this amazing news were true.

"Ah think," said the unfortunate Broad, "that he's a scoundrel, and ah think he ought to be kicked."

"Boys," said Mark's voice from behind the screen, "don't you think you've had about enough of it?" He walked into the open room and faced his companions. "There isn't one of you who didn't know that Mr. Wilstrop and I were seated here. It's a shame to lead that poor beggar on in that way."

The wretched Broad quailed, and all the colour forsook his cheeks. But Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop took a desperate courage at Mark's tone, and in his turn emerged from behind the screen. A single

glance assured him that his accuser was a greater coward than himself; and before the blood got back to his own face or his eyes had lost their strained and startled look, he found himself equal at least to an attitude of lordly indignation.

“It happens fortunately for me, sir,” he began, rolling his r’s a little more than common, “that I overheard your libellous statement concerning myself and my hard-earned success of to-night. Repeat that libel if you dare, sir.” He shook a ponderous forefinger at the shrinking, half-annihilated Broad. “Repeat it, sir, in the presence of Mr. Stanley and myself.”

What Mark might say or do he could not guess, but in the midst of his bluster he cast a supplicating look at him.

“Don’t spoil Broad,” said Mark. “He gives delight and hurts not, and I wouldn’t have him altered for the world.”

The actor-manager took further courage, and advanced on Broad with outstretching thumb and forefinger. Broad buried the menaced feature in both hands and recoiled behind a table.

“Permit me, gentlemen,” cried Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop, “to vindicate in Mr. Stanley’s presence the character which has here been publicly aspersed. The facts are these, and I appeal to Mr. Stanley to confirm them. I wrote a play and requested Mr. Stanley’s opinion of it as a friend. Is that so, sir?” he demanded, turning upon Mark, with an elaborate show of honest wrath.

“That is undoubtedly so,” Mark answered, with a perfect dryness.

“Mr. Stanley saw his way to an improvement in the piece,” pursued Mr. Wilstrop, inwardly discomposed and timid at the tone and measure of Mark’s voice. “He suggested in the course of friendly conversation certain changes, which after consideration I consented to adopt. Is that so, Mr. Stanley?”

“That is so,” said Mr. Stanley, as drily as before.

“I left the manuscript in Mr. Stanley’s charge,” said Mr. Wilstrop, dreading the other’s quietude more and more. “He made the alterations he had suggested, and I paid him for his assistance the sum agreed on. Is that point also accurately stated, Mr. Stanley?”

“You have not made a statement, Mr. Wilstrop,” Mark replied, “which I have the wish to deny.”

“You hear, gentlemen!” the actor-manager cried, inflating his chest, and looking about him with exciting eyes. “Is the calumny crushed in the bud? Is the snake killed, gentlemen, or only scotched? Have I done with it for good and all, or am I to encounter this scurrilous accusation in some new form?” He was growing bolder and more like himself every minute, and such a creature is a liar in good practice that a glow of honest indignation warmed his veins. He advanced with the threatening gesture he had before employed against the hapless Broad, who took a new hold upon his own nose, and dodged him round the table. “As for you, sir,” he stormed, “you have backed your statement by the mention of an honourable name ——”

Very much to his amazement Mark took him quietly but strongly by the arm.

"I would leave that question alone if I were you, Mr. Wilstrop," the young man said. The actor read a covert menace in the words, and cowered a little.

"You advise that, dear boy?" he asked, with instant suppleness. "I will allow myself to be guided by your judgment."

"It will be better so, believe me," Mark said quietly. "Let us go back to supper."

They left the knot of listeners and retired once more behind the screen, but the knives and forks lay unemployed, and not a word was spoken between the disturbed and silent *convives*. Wilstrop frothed out a bumper of champagne for his companion and himself,

and called in a masterful voice for another bottle.

“No more for me,” said Mark.

“I am excited—I am fatigued—I am disturbed, dear boy,” the other declared. “I stand in need of a little stimulant.”

The new bottle was brought and opened, and Mr. Wilstrop having consumed some two-thirds of it paid his bill and magnificently presented the remainder to the waiter. Then he took Mark’s arm and walked from the club, bowing right and left with a stiffened majesty, to indicate that he had not yet forgotten the affront which had been put upon him.

The June night was cool, and a northern wind was blowing. The fresh air and the wine in combination made the actor’s head to swim a

little, and he was a trifle uncertain as to where his feet touched the pavement. In a minute or two these sensations cleared away, but when he spoke he was still under the dominion of the vine. He paused in the street and checked his companion by laying both hands upon his breast.

“Stanley,” he said, “I little thought when I entrusted you with the result of my own labours that you would make it shameful in me to father them. I tell you, dear boy, I resent it. I resent it with all the forces of my nature. For years I toiled and struggled, hoped and strove. Toiled and struggled, and hoped and strove, dear boy, in vain. To-night for the first time I grasped the goblet of success,—and then, dear boy, what happens? Your loathsome figure stands between myself and it. For your work upon my play I

shall never forgive you. You sear the laurel on my brow. You poison the cup of pleasure at my lips. I hate you, dear boy. I shall hate you all my life."

"*In vino veritas*," said Mark. "Good-night."

CHAPTER VI.

SUMMER and autumn gone and winter going. March, having come in like a lion, was doing his best to go out like one. Jing sat at the fireside, sewing, and occasionally glancing out of the window at the driving sleet blown slantwise by the howling wind. She was not alone, for Miss Delacour, of the Theatre Royal, sat near at hand, drumming with her finger tips upon the table with a vexed and dreary air. When Miss Delacour, of the Theatre Royal, was neither at work nor engaged in mischief, that vexed and dreary look was apt to settle upon her face, and would go far in a little while to

spoil its beauty. Miss Delacour was extremely young to be attached to any house of public entertainment. She was just between girlhood and precocious womanhood, and looking somewhat older than her real age might have passed for seventeen.

Her fingers went tapping on the table, beating a louder and still louder disordered march there until Jing took them both in her own hands and quieted them.

“You’re fidgety to-day, dear.”

“Fidgety? Who wouldn’t be fidgety in a poky hole like this? Oh, I’m sick of it. I’m sick of everything. I wish I was dead.”

“I’m sure,” said Jing, “that you don’t wish anything of the kind.”

“I’m sure I do,” Miss Delacour responded;

and added fiercely: "What do you know about it?"

"My dear Esther," cried Jing, putting an arm about the girl's neck.

"Oh yes! your dear Esther!" said the girl, repulsing her. "Don't talk that sort of rot to me. Lave me aloooan."

There was a curious mixture of accents in Miss Delacour's speech. For a sentence, if it were brief, she could command a fair imitation of a sort of fine lady's voice—the stage sort rather than the real perhaps. Then suddenly would pop in the broadest South Stafford drawl, at patchwork variance with the artificial tone.

"Now you know," said Jing patiently, "how often you think and speak quite differently."

"Think and speak differently!" said the girl,

with concentrated scorn. "Who doesn't think and speak differently one time and another? Are you always the same, any more than I am?"

"I try to be, dear," said Jing.

"You try to be, dear!" mimicked Miss Delacour.

"Now there I stop," said Jing, with a mild decision. "When you grow to be so unkind and so ill-bred as that, I know that you really mean to be disagreeable, and then I have to leave you."

"That's where you've got the pull o' me," Miss Delacour declared, with a passionate white face. "You can scratch, and look as if you kept your temper. I know. You've made a fool o' me fifty thousand times a'ready. You'd wait for me to cry and kiss and mek it up again. Well, you'll ha' to wait. I've done it before, but I shan't do it this time."

Jing, wisely declining further controversy, took up her sewing and resumed the seat she had quitted a moment or two before. The girl rose and began to flash about the room, now in mere hoydenish ill-temper, and now with the air of an insulted queen of tragedy.

Nine months had almost sufficed to change the child into a woman. They had actually afforded time for Esther Reddy to blossom into Miss Delacour; and Miss Delacour, having been entrusted with a speaking part of six lines in the local pantomime, was in many respects a changed personage. The high-sounding name was a jocular gift of Mark's, and she had at first adopted it with eager delight, and had seen it in very small letters on the bills with quite indescribable emotions. "Fairy Sunshine, Miss Evelyn Delacour."

Mark had carefully taught her to speak her lines; and since she was very graceful, straight-limbed and pretty, she had gone through her business with as much success as any young lady commanding a salary of fifteen shillings a week could have a right to expect. Her figure had shot up amazingly. She wore long frocks, and having grown neater and more precise about her person than of old looked very young-ladylike.

Jing went on quietly with her sewing, and took no notice of Esther's vivid movements about the room.

"I know what you're thinking about," said Esther.

"Do you, dear?" Jing asked, with a calmness all the more provoking because it was meant to be conciliatory.

"Yes, I do," flashed the other. "You're thinking I'm a beast."

"I'm sure I wasn't, dear," said Jing; "but if you'll let me, and won't be angry about it, I'll tell you what I really was thinking."

"Oh," cried Miss Esther ungraciously, "you can say what you like to me."

"I was thinking, dear," said Jing, "laying her sewing on her lap, 'what a pity it is that you, who are so pretty and can be so nice when you like, should make it so hard for your friends to love you. You might have everybody about the house in love with you.'"

"Do you think I'm pretty, Jing?" the girl asked, dropping her sulky mask instantly, and beaming with delighted vanity.

“‘Handsome is that handsome does, dear,’” Jing responded.

“Oh bother!” cried the child, and straightway fell back into the sulks again.

The experience of three-quarters of a year had taught Jing how to manage her. Miss Delacour could bear any kind of reproach but that conveyed by silence. The louder kind of complaint she delighted in; and a battle she sniffed from afar, like Job’s war-horse, with splendid anticipation.

A full ten minutes went by, in the course of which she flung herself noisily into many attitudes of anger and contempt.

“I know,” she said at last. “You’re thinking what a beast I am.”

Jing still said nothing, and there was a new silence.

"I am a beast," the girl declared then, half sobbing. "I think I've got the devil in me. I do, upon my word I do."

She flung herself impetuously at her companion, and embraced her with tears.

"It's never you, Jing, when we quarrel. It's always me. I'm always to blame, I'm always in the wrong."

She was on a new tack in a second, and away marching up and down the room.

"It's a shame ; it's a thundering shame."

"Come back, Esther," said Jing, rising and opening her arms.

Esther flung herself into the offered embrace, and having kissed her companion rapturously over and over again, declared that she was an angel, and dissolved in tears. Then the electric disturbance

being over and the skies cleared for a while, she promised contritely to be good for the future and to display no more causeless fits of temper. Jing, with every appearance of faith, accepted her promise, and gave her plenary absolution for the time. Five minutes later the mercurial young person was singing comic songs on the upper landing; and tiring of this in a while, filled up a pair of Herr von Nadli's shoes with water and went downstairs again with a demure countenance, certain of the recognition of her handiwork but confident of forgiveness for a single coaxing word.

She was the plague and the charm of the household. The old people shook their heads about her sadly, and prophesied that she would make everybody's heart ache. Mrs. Broom was especially certain that the child had no heart of her own,

and that her momentary transports of affection were untrustworthy. More or less everybody shared that belief, but everybody loved her. She was alternately imp and angel ; the most irritating, most delightful, least forgiveable, and most lovable of children. She kept the household in perpetual feud, always having one half for her partisans and the other half for her accusers. She varied the state of parties with an infinite dexterity, changing adherents into enemies, and enemies into adherents day by day.

There was one member of the household whose allegiance never wavered. Mark multiplied the scriptural seventy times seven into seven hundred times seventy, and was willing to carry the multiplication infinitely further. It was no especial grace of Nature in him ; for even at her naughtiest

and most wilful he found something exquisitely quaint and pleasing in her. He naturally became her confidant, and was the first to be informed of her tricks of mischief and her troubles, both of which were beyond counting.

Mark had a little superstition about the child; and though he professed not to attach the slightest importance to it, it had a certain weight with him. She was his Mascotte, to his way of thinking; and almost from the moment of his first encounter with her he had entered on a career of good fortune. The very day after the discovery of her he had been for the first time entrusted with the writing of a descriptive article; and though his chiefs kept their own counsel about the matter, they were a little surprised to find a member of their reporting staff a master of the tersest, purest, and most

pointed English. Mark had been working all his life with that willing slavery which is perhaps the surest badge of genius, to found and form a style ; and for an unknown man on a local journal he was something of a phenomenon. The chiefs worked the willing horse hard, and gave him chance after chance to display his powers. He asked no better, and never so much as dreamed of applying for an increase of salary. Sometimes on railway journeys he heard people talking about his work. Men of local standing began to treat him with consideration. If he had been a trifle less shabby he might have been invited out a good deal, and have become a man of social note. He had begun by the compositor's frame ; and his schooling had taught him no more than to read, write, and cypher, but nobody

could have guessed that from his speech or manner.

All the chances of good work his chiefs gave him were wine and meat to him. His own satisfaction paid him better than money could have done, though when the money came in its turn it was certainly very welcome. His editor was a man potent in those parts, a man of unusual capacity, with a rare scent for literary talent, and an unusually ready and generous acceptance of it. He called Mark into his room one morning and bade him take a chair.

"I am going to make a proposal to you, Mr. Stanley," he began. "You have been doing excellent work of late, and I am eminently satisfied. I had a talk with the proprietors yesterday, and we agreed to offer you the post of special

correspondent. We propose to give you a salary of six guineas per week, and we expect that in return for that you will remain as completely at the disposal of the paper as you have been hitherto. We intend to extend our sphere a good deal, and you will have to move about. I want you to start in half an hour's time for Scarborough. What shall you want to take with you? You'll be away three days."

"A paper collar and a tooth-brush," Mark suggested tentatively.

"Buy a paper collar and a tooth-brush, Mr. Stanley," said the editor. "You can get what you require beyond them when you get there. You will be allowed first-class travelling expenses, and a guinea a day for your hotel charges. You may take that as the basis of your arrange-

ment with the office. I suppose you accept the terms?"

Accept? His good fortune half stunned him, and he was well on the way to Scarborough before he fully realised what had befallen him. Up till then he had been in a dream, with all manner of wild fancies of splendour floating through his mind; but now he began to settle down and to see what he could really do with his unexpected riches. He could treble the dear old mother's allowance. She could spend her summer at the seaside and her winter in some place where her bronchitis would be less trying than in the dreary north. That disposed of, and not disposed of altogether with dry eyes, his fancy began to play about his *protégée*. He was not at a very fatherly age, but he was altogether fatherly in his thoughts about

little Esther, and in his fancy he attired her in all the grace his manlike ignorance of millinery could command. He would make her the prettiest little creature in the town. That she was already; but he would give the jewel its proper setting, so that all people should see its brilliance.

“I’ll hire a piano for her,” he thought, “and she shall learn to play. Old Von Nadli can give her lessons. That’ll be a help for him, poor old chap! He’ll dine a little oftener for it.”

He thought that he himself might dine a little better than he had been in the habit of doing, and though he was neither glutton or gourmet the fancy was far from being unpleasant. His daily dinner for many a month past had consisted of sausages with mashed potatoes and a hunch of bread. He

took it standing, with an upturned barrel for a table, and it put him to an expense of sixpence halfpenny. Sometimes, when the past economies of the week allowed of such an extravagance, he added a substantial slab of cheese which cost a penny, and on gala days even a half-pint of bitter. A guinea a day for hotel charges would find him more than that.

He seemed to have found Eldorado, and there was no end to what he might do with his riches. He could save enough out of this present journey to afford half a dozen pairs of gloves for Jing. Her needle was very dexterous, but it failed to hide her shabbiness in that particular. How dexterous it was, and how untiring too, Mark had cause to know as well as anybody. It was Jing who had made his own poverty at all presentable. She

trimmed his frayed cuffs and collars, and by the stitch in time which saves nine had stopped many an incipient gap in the threadbare seams of his coat. He was a hasty and careless dresser, and if it had not been for her would scarcely have owned a button. Jing must be thanked in some way. He fell to dreaming pleasantly about her, thinking how pretty and how good she was,—what an altogether pleasing, quiet, unobtrusive, household fairy.

But the one unforgettable thing of that memorable journey came to him as he was stretching his legs on the platform of York Station. The scent of a cigar touched his nostrils, and awoke a hunger in him, as it always did.

“By Jove,” said Mark, “I haven’t smoked for three months. It’s no criminality or extravagance now ; I can afford it.”

Mark ventured sixpence, and passed the next half-hour in supreme bliss. One does not buy the finest quality of cigar for sixpence at a railway refreshment buffet, but Mark had never been able to be choice in that particular. He had never realised until that happy moment, when he climbed back into the carriage and lit up, how much he had surrendered.

The discovery made him feel comfortably virtuous. No man objects to thinking well of himself. It is agreeable to know that one has been valorous, generous, self-sacrificing.

The journey was a veritable pleasure excursion, and the work that grew out of it as brisk and enlivening as champagne. His commanders gave him plenty to do, and for a month or two he was here, there, and everywhere. Strikes, elections,

life-boat launchings, flower-shows, hangings, royal progresses—there was matter for a hot brain everywhere.

He was one of those people who work reluctantly (for by nature he was idle and contemplative), but who when they work at all wake to a fiery ardour, and do it with every fibre of the soul.

In these young days he had worn out none of his energies, and could bring a fresh eye to a hundred spectacles of human life which had long since grown banal to journalists of riper age, so that in whatever he did there was a certain bright and youthful charm.

Still more good luck befel him. He had sent a little story or two, a little poem or two, and a small handful of social articles long ago to different magazines in London.

In some instances he had learned that they were under consideration, and in others had received no answer whatsoever.

Now there fell upon him a little snow of proof sheets and of editorial notes, to be followed later on by remittances, not enormous in amount, but fully equal to his own modest appreciation of his work, and wonderfully exhilarating.

All this having come upon him since his adoption of little Esther was associated with her in his mind, and gave a sort of perfume in his thoughts.

The things we believe are not the things we say we believe, or even the things we believe that we believe.

Really, and at the bottom of his mind, Mark thought that his protection of Esther had brought

him good luck, though when he felt inclined to be open and above board with himself he derided the superstition.

He made a little lady of her to look at, clothing her in accordance with Jing's best taste, and rejoicing her small soul with little gifts of fanciful silver brooches and trifles of mother-of-pearl and ivory, all of which she accepted and wore with the gratitude and modesty of a peacock. He employed old Herr von Nadli to teach her to play upon the piano and give her lessons in singing.

Jing gave the young lady practical and constant lessons in deportment, by which on the one side she profited immensely and on the other not at all. Mark laboured to refine her English; and altogether Esther had a little cloud of masters and

mistresses such as few young persons of her social standing could have hoped to command. She commanded every one of them, and in the long or the short run had her own mischievous kittenish way.

When the pantomime season came round and she somehow got wind of the fact that a girl of her age might earn money as an extra, nothing would satisfy her but that she should have a place assigned her there. She was to have walked on, in an Eastern procession, in the character of a youthful prince, a personage who was naturally dumb upon the stage. But mademoiselle knew so well where her own advantage lay that she set immediate baby siege to the heart of the stage-manager, and in three days had conquered that stern citadel. She became the Fairy

Sunshine, with a speaking part of six lines, and blossomed upon the public as Miss Evelyn Delacour.

When she first pronounced her lines in Mark's presence the young journalist laughed like one of Homer's gods; the homely midland accent so quaintly contrasted with the high-falutin sentiment of the verse.

She sulked in majesty for three or four days after this, but by-and-by came back eager to be corrected. Mark taught her with his usual affectionate painstaking, and found her a pupil at once apt and willing. When she had once been thoroughly taught she developed a wonderful unexpected spontaneity, and spoke her words with so much nature, vivacity, and grace that in her little world of nobodies she became remarkable.

“That little besom,” said old Broom, “will make an actress. Now you take notice of my words, Mark. I’ve had experience enough to know what I’m talking about, and I tell you that we’ve gone to set fire to a stick, and we’ve started a rocket. If she plays her cards properly there’s no saying where the little baggage may be by the time she’s five-and-twenty.”

The old gentleman had certainly warranty enough in his own experience, and had seen so many youthful competitors, male and female, go by him in the race of art and life, that he might well be acquitted of any extravagance of fancy. He had not always been condemned to the provinces, and during his twenty years of fading ambition in London had seen the shabby little extra girl at six shillings a week grow and blossom

into a society as well as a stage queen, surrounded by men of wealth and title eager for her smiles.

He had seen such a developed beauty wearing resplendent jewels on the stage, the bare settings of which would in her earlier days have seemed an incredible fortune for her whole family. Whether little Esther had that electric touch which, laid upon the world, commands its worship, was a very, very open question yet ; but it was obvious that the child had talent and had found her place. The old man babbled the romantic and ridiculous fancies he had seen justified in half a dozen cases, and the young one listened well pleased.

When the run of the pantomime was nearing to its close Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop turned up

in the neighbouring town of Wolverhampton, where he charmed the natives with a round of Shakespearian characters. It was a part of Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop's method of warfare against the world to hire, purchase, and carry as few stage properties as possible, and to borrow or annex as many as circumstances would permit.

Here a gun and there a helmet, now a bunch of artificial flowers and then a table-cloth, would find its accidental way into one of his property baskets, so that he would begin a tour with a few odd articles and end with complete sets. Out of the pantomime season the stock companies found everything except for the personal necessities of himself and Miss Carrington. Whilst the pantomimes were running he had to take the smaller towns and to carry with him a scratch company,

and was often put to considerable straits for its appointments. There was a Providence for him (and indeed at that time for all parsimonious and impecunious travelling managers) in the generosity of the big provincial theatres.

He came over to Birmingham now in search of suits of armour for his Saturday night's representation of "Macbeth," and arrived in the middle of a *matinée* performance. He had just exchanged a lordly word with the prompter, who had offered him a respectable recognition, when he found himself familiarly hailed by a fairy in tights and spangles, with a crown of gold-red hair.

"Why, here's old Wilstrop!" said the fairy, nodding at him easily. "How are you?"

"You know me, my dear!" said Mr. Wilstrop, smoothing his clean-shaven chin with thumb and

finger as he looked down on her, "but upon my word ——"

"You don't know me?" said the fairy. "Why, you found me crying on a doorstep nine months ago. You and Mark."

"What?" exclaimed Mr. Wilstrop with a swift revival of his old benevolent interest, which meant as much as the old benevolent interest itself had done. "Are you the little girl I rescued?"

"There's my cue," said Esther, and tripped on to the stage as *insouciant*e as if she had spent her life there.

The actor-manager put up his double eyeglasses and looked after her. He heard her speak her lines; and noticed, like the trained old hand he was, the spontaneous applause which followed

them. He was not a man who ran before the public, and what pleased the house pleased him.

The fairy came swaggering back again and passed before him striking the boards at her feet smartly with the wand she carried, and putting herself into an attitude of mock majesty. Then with a sudden gamin laugh she poked his well-clothed ribs with her forefingers.

“Is that all right, old bird?”

Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop put a finger under her chin and turned her face upwards.

“You are simply charming, my dear,” he said. “You are simply charming. I must really take an interest in you. You must come to London, my dear. To London.”

CHAPTER VII.

MR. WILSTROP pretty generally said a good deal more than he meant to abide by ; but the Fairy Sunshine was altogether too young and inexperienced to be able properly to measure him. She took his words in all seriousness, and talked about them night and day. London, of course, was no more than a vast brilliant cloud of fancy to her. There were people and palaces in it, crowds and crowds and crowds of people and palaces by the score. The Town Hall and the General Hospital helped her to some conception of what a palace might be ; and her young mind built edifices of

Babylonian vastness. She spent hundreds of waking and sleeping hours in that huge and vague dream city. She talked about London with anybody she could get to describe it to her. She read about it industriously whenever she got the chance.

The story of the young man with the half-crown who went there and became lord mayor made such an impression upon her that if she had been entitled to wear trousers she would have packed up her bundle and have started for the City of Miraculous Success forthwith. But being persuaded that girls but rarely make fortunes in business, she stopped at home for the time being, and fretted and pined a good deal at her enforced inaction.

That everybody was infinitely kind to her, that she was treated a thousand times better than she

had ever merited or hoped, that all her naughtinesses were pardoned and all her agreeable ways ungrudgingly recognised—that, in short, her life was as pleasant as love and patience could make it, was nothing to her. She wanted what she wanted, and she wanted it at once.

The people about the house hardly knew what had come to the child, she spent so many quiet, musing hours. The pantomime season came to a close, and there were no more crowds to show off to, to laugh at an occasional insubordinate daring pretty antic, and to applaud her half-dozen lines.

The salt of life had lost its savour, and she knew of nothing wherewith to salt it. Mark, who understood her better than anybody else, partly comprehended the empty dulness of her life in

these days, but not even he could fairly measure the catastrophe which had befallen her. Esther's triumph had been a very small affair indeed, but to her it had looked far otherwise. Admiration and applause had spoilt her for the life of quiet which followed, and it is really not a word too strong to say that when they were taken away from her she was like a drinker robbed of his bottle. An empty, miserable, insatiable craving was upon her, which nothing but the one draught could satisfy.

She was better off than the crowd of her pantomime contemporaries, who, when the curtain rang down on the performance for the last time, faded back into their native neglect and slatternliness, with little hope of emerging from it again for full nine months to come. Esther was retained in the

company as utility lady, but for six months she hardly had so much as a line at a time to speak. She went on with the crowd, and was occasionally to be seen in the costume of a housemaid dusting furniture with a feather brush. She sometimes carried on a letter, or assisted a leading lady to put on or take off a mantle.

It was something, to be sure, to show the gold-red hair, the pretty eyes and the subtle figure, of whose ripening beauties she was beginning to be conscious, even though she displayed them under conditions so humiliating. She knew, or thought she knew, that she employed the feather brush with a vivacity and naturalness which older and more experienced actresses sometimes forgot to display. She thought when she carried on the salver, and said "A letter, sir," that she imparted a

tone to the scene which her elder rivals had no art to give. She was not altogether a prey to vanity in this respect, though it came natural and easy to her to exaggerate her own importance, as it does sometimes to older and wiser people.

She was a born actress, and had even thus early in her career a certain distinction of naturalness and sincerity in the least bit of work entrusted to her, which lifted her clean out of the rut of conventionality in which her compeers were condemned by their native incapacity to labour.

There were two or three glorious young bucks, who always attended the theatre in evening dress, and fondly thought themselves men about town, who, half in chaff and half in admiration, would give her a friendly hand whenever she came on. Her feminine elders were jealous of this tiny

triumph, and thus accentuated it enough to make it at times delightful.

If she had really known what the life she was leading meant for her, she would have been grateful rather than ungrateful. She was seeing the last of an excellent old school of art and at the same time the beginning of a better, and, being equally trained between the two, was insensibly acquiring the virtues of both. And beyond this growing night by night more and more perfectly accustomed to face the house, she was learning that complete self-possession which is the very tap-root of the actor's art. In that art the woman may be as self-conscious as she pleases, but the merest visible speck of self-consciousness kills all. It is there that the amateur of genius dwindles before practised mediocrity.

In the autumn Miss Delacour was promoted to be principal utility and under study for chambermaid and *ingénue* parts. Then, indeed, in her small way she began to know the sickness of heart which comes from hope deferred. She had to make herself mistress upon occasion of half a dozen parts a week, and found herself called upon to play in no one of them. If anybody had ever taken the trouble to teach her to say her prayers she would certainly have prayed for some illness to fall upon the chambermaid. The chambermaid was a stalwart little mother of a family, somewhere in the later thirties, pert and buxom to look at yet behind the lights, but away from their influence elderly, unattractive and untidy. She had a lubberly son, who was half a head taller than Esther, and who hung about

the theatre in hopes of the reversion of the call-boy's office.

Every day's training and study prepared Miss Delacour for her work, but she was sick of her apprenticeship before it had well begun, and would have undertaken the part of Desdemona or Ophelia without misgiving. She was under study in turn for Maria in "The School for Scandal," Mrs. Younghusband in "Married Life," Sam Willoughby in "The Ticket of Leave Man," Little Emily and the Marchioness, for Tilly Slowboy in "The Cricket on the Hearth," and for the Fairy of the Golden Locks in Byron's burlesque.

She rehearsed her parts with fire and fervour in her bedroom. She gabbled them over in the streets as she rambled about alone. She went to

bed with them, and they mingled with her dreams. She stood at the wings and acted in her savagely ambitious little soul whilst that mother of a family of a chambermaid, or the stupid wax-doll of an *ingénue*, walked woodenly through the part which she could have sworn to infuse with life and sparkle. She knew that both of them had been ill enough, over and over again, righteously to abstain from playing, if it had not been for their wretched jealousy, which of course prompted them to do whatever they could to rob her of a chance of achieving a success.

“Of course, they’d rather die,” said Esther, “than give me my chance, the mean, spiteful creatures!”

She broke out with this complaint to Jing on

one occasion, and was met with mild remonstrance.

“Now you know, dear,” said Jing, “you should never accuse others of being ready to do things which you wouldn’t do yourself; and I’m sure that you never would be so spiteful as to keep anybody else from a chance of getting on.”

“Wouldn’t I!” said Esther, with a click of her little white teeth. “Just you give me the chance, that’s all.”

Jing, who was blessed with a sense of humour, laughed, and the subject was allowed to drop; but Esther nursed her grievances in her own small heart for months. It happened, however, one day when she was making the Broom household quite a purgatory, and was displaying a peevishness and ill-temper unwonted even for

her, there came a thundering summons at the door, followed by a shrill pealing of the bell, and this double call being answered, behold upon the doorstep a cheeky boy in a fur cap and a red comforter, who announced in a cracked treble, as if for the benefit of the neighbourhood at large, that Miss Delacour was to go to the theatre immediately. The boy waited for no question, but withdrew himself at once, and plunged precipitately into a game of hop-scotch on the pavement.

Esther, hearing her name thus cried, rose in great agitation, and with wide eyes and blanched cheeks looked from one to another of the little family group with a startled, unspoken question.

“You’ve got your chance, my dear,” said Mrs. Broom comfortably. “Something has happened to Miss St. Clare. She told me last night that

one of her children had got the measles. I suppose it's a bad case, and the manager won't allow her to come to the theatre. That's what it is, my dear, you may depend upon it. You've got the chance you've been longing for, and I'm sure we'll all wish you well through with it."

At this, the child got her first touch of stage-fright, and for a minute or two it turned her faint and sick.

"I shall never do it," she said. "It's too big. They've no right to ask me to do it."

"That wasn't the song of yesterday, my dear," said Mrs. Broom. "You'll feel a little nervous just at first, and if you didn't I should have no hope of you at all. You'll do it very nicely, I'm quite sure."

"We'll go down together," said Jing. "Put your things on, Esther. Mother, you might look and see if she's got the right sort of shoes and stockings. If she hasn't we can buy them this afternoon. They'll find the dress and the wig in the wardrobe."

"Wig!" protested Esther, clutching her own gold-red locks. "I shan't wear a wig."

"No, no, my dear," said Mrs. Broom, soothingly. "I'll see to your hair for you. It will just want a touch of the tongs, and then it will do lovely as it is."

Then the damsel grew all vivacity and chatter, dashing hither and thither, and casting the whole household into amused confusion. After a wildly wasted ten minutes Jing got her away, and at the theatre it turned out that Mrs. Broom's surmise

was true. Miss Delacour had been sent for thus early to see if the dresses in the wardrobe of the theatre fitted her, and if not, to arrange them before nightfall.

The wardrobe mistress was in a state of great excitement, deep in business, and very little disposed to attend for the moment to so unimportant a person as Miss Delacour. The whole of the great table in the centre of the room was strewn with dresses of rich fabric and splendid colour, a consignment having just arrived for the forthcoming pantomime. The wardrobe mistress and her aids were busy sorting, examining and counting, and the work was got through with more than necessary bustle and excitement and a prodigious feminine clacking.

“The manager doesn’t send for me at nine

o'clock in the morning for nothing," said Miss Delacour, who knew at all times how to represent her own interests.

"Oh, I can't talk to you for hours yet," said the wardrobe mistress, turning a perspiring, anxious face for a moment, and then going back to her work again. "Mrs. Jordan's got to catch the one o'clock train to London, and you haven't."

"I was told to come here," said Esther sullenly, "and that you would see to me."

"Drat the child!" said the wardrobe mistress. "What's the profession coming to? Every chit of a girl seems to think now-a-days that the house depends upon her."

"What is it, my dear?" asked the lady from London, noticing Esther's downcast and angry face.

"I've got to play Henri in 'Belphegor' to-night," said Esther. "I've been under studying. The dresses won't fit me, and they've got to be altered at a minute's notice. I've only just heard that I shall have to play the part."

She dilated with a pretty self-importance ; for it was the young lady's good fortune or ill fortune to look charming under any sort of emotion. Just now her cheeks were flushed, her blue eyes sparkled with ambition and resentment, and every line of her figure was full of an unusual grace and animation.

The lady from London was a small person with a mincing cockney accent, a false voice, and a quick, fawning smile. She was scrupulously neat, in a black dress with masculine white cuffs and all-round collar, and wore her black hair clinging

close to her head and forehead, and bound in a scanty knob at the back after the early Victorian fashion.

"I think we shall have time to attend to the young lady, Mrs. Summers," said this personage. "We've only eleven more sets to go through, and it's always a good thing to oblige the management."

"That's your own affair, Mrs. Jordan," said the wardrobe mistress tartly. "If you like to risk missing your train it's no affair of mine."

"Oh," said Mrs. Jordan, "we can get through quite comfortably. Two hours will do everything."

She spoke with a picked deliberation and was at constant wary war with her aspirates. She came out victor in "hour," but fell into

the trap spread for her by the enemy in "heverything".

The wardrobe mistress yielded, though with a very bad grace. The dresses were produced, tried on, and found to be much too large. Esther was dismissed, with instructions to be back again in an hour. In the meantime the rehearsal had begun, and by the time she had descended to the stage she heard herself called. The tragedian of the week was there already, waiting to put her through her work. He was a handsome, rather bored-looking man, who was getting on towards the fifties. He had a manner of great gentleness; and when Esther took her place tremblingly beside him, he gave her a word or two of encouragement in so kindly and fatherly a voice that she took heart at once. It was one

thing to picture by the aid of an exuberant fancy the crowded theatre weeping and palpitating at her bidding, and another to stand in the chill grey twilight of the stage, with the empty house yawning like a great cave beyond, with all the velvet of the boxes muffled in dim wrappings, as if the audience were dead and under cerements there. She spoke her lines but stiffly and mechanically.

“Yes,” said her tutor. “Very nice, very nice indeed. But we’re a bit nervous to begin with. Try that speech again. Like this.”

She caught the tone he gave her, and taking more and more confidence from his patient looks, seized on it with her quick dramatic instinct and imitated it to the life.

“Bravo!” said the tragedian, touching her

lightly on each shoulder. "That's better. Keep it at that."

She got back to complete ease before him, and the work went on with unusual prosperity for so inexperienced a beginner.

"You've brought the words with you, my dear," said her tutor. "And that's a great matter. We'll run through that last bit again. Eh? Just to get a little more life and nature into it. You're starving, you know, my dear. You're very wretched and hungry—you're very weak, and in great pain, and you're trying to be brave under it all. Now, try to feel like that. Then you'll be able to look like it and to talk like it. Now we'll try again."

They tried again; and this time he patted her shoulder at the close with a warmer and less qualified encomium than before. In spite of all

the praise, Esther was a little dashed. There was perhaps more in the business than she had known of. It dawned upon her dimly that the part might after all have been a little safer in the hands of the mother of a family. For almost the first time in her life she felt doubtful of herself.

She had to go back to the wardrobe to try on the dresses, and by this time found the morning's work approaching a conclusion, and the wardrobe woman in a somewhat better temper. Possibly an empty flat bottle and a couple of tumblers standing on a shelf near at hand had had something to do with this amelioration. Mrs. Jordan was even more amiable than she had been earlier in the morning, and as she fussed about Esther, aiding in the trying on of the costume, her breath had a hot sickly sweetness, which

forced the girl to turn her head away. The lady from London had the habit of making affectionate little pecks and catches at anybody to whom she talked, and once or twice she caressed Esther's hair and cheeks. This, taken in combination with the odour of her breath, displeased the young woman mightily. But, with all this, Mrs. Jordan had such flattering words and wheedling ways that Esther submitted.

"There now," said Mrs. Jordan, withdrawing herself in a series of little mincing ecstatic curtsies, with the fawning smile fixed upon her face, "I call that perfectly lovely. Now there's an Ongri for you if you like, Mrs. Summers. Really, dearie, you must let me ask you for a kiss."

The flattery more than paid for the dislike, and Esther surrendered her cheek.

"Why, dearie," cried Mrs. Jordan, kneeling down beside her, and holding her at arm's length, "you ought never to be burying that beautiful face and figure down here. The young gentlemen at the Frivolity'd give a finger a piece for a look at you. If you was only as much as in the front row at the Lane you'd have a dozen followers in a week."

"You mustn't talk to Miss Delacour like that," the wardrobe mistress broke in. "I can assure you, Mrs. Jordan, Miss Delacour is respectable. She's living with one of the best families in the town."

"Respectable!" echoed Mrs. Jordan. "Why, Mrs. Summers, you'd surely never accuse me of hinting that she wasn't. As if a pretty young lady couldn't have followers in any number and

be respectable in spite of all of 'em ! How many have I known as was like the snowdrops for their purity, as wore their diamonds and drove their bromes, for all that ? And that, you know as well as me, Mrs. Summers, is what this dear young thing might do if she was took in 'and."

What with her own natural emotions and the vanished contents of the little flat bottle, the lady from London was a little warm, and being warm, forgot her warfare with the letter H, which had its wicked will of her, and came into her speech or went out of it without guidance or control.

"I daresay," returned Mrs. Summers rather curtly. "You can get your own things on, my dear, and run downstairs again. I'll take this in a bit at the shoulders, and then it'll do very nicely."

Esther, with a head full of visions, obeyed in a thoughtful silence, and having reassumed her ordinary attire, went quietly downstairs. She had a frank repugnance for the lady from London ; but, after all, there was something deliciously exciting in her promises ; and the girl's head was turning with the intoxication of ignorance, hope and wonder.

Even the promise of that night's success looked poor beside the prospects held out to her. There never yet was fair maid but made mouths in a glass ; and Esther had perhaps made more than her share, and was quite as agreeably conscious of her own personal advantages as anybody else was likely to be.

It happened that there was another tyro being drilled upon the stage, a little but not much more

experienced than herself; and this time the task was divided between the stage-manager and Jing. Esther stood in a darkened corner of the stage waiting for her companion, when Mrs. Jordan came downstairs and instantly espied her.

“If ever,” she said, sidling up to the girl with an air of almost bashful friendship, “you should take it into your pretty head to come to London you might call on me, dearie. I can always put you up for a night or two, and I’m sure I shall be very glad to do it. There’s my card, dearie. Don’t lose it. I shall expect to see you one of these fine days.”

All poor little Esther’s repugnance for the lady from London was fast vanishing. She took her card, accepting and even returning her parting embrace; and her foolish little head began to

whirl at a dangerous speed. To be seen, courted, flattered, admired, to have her own way — she seemed to have been born for that and for nothing else. She was inclined at least to live for that, and did not so much as dream of any sacrifice which might be exacted from her in return.

The lady from London being gone, Esther read the card, and hid it away in the bosom of her dress. It ran thus :—

MRS. JORDAN,

Costumière to the Principal Theatres,

303 Long Acre, W.C.

Ring the middle bell.

Mark had a pretty stiff afternoon of it, though he took a pleasure in it too, and gave his services

with perfect willingness. He became a chopping block for Miss Esther to try her histrionic edge upon. She went through everything before him with no embarrassment—looks, tones, attitudes, speeches—till she herself was tired, and actually, by way of an unheard-of wonder, returned to the room she occupied with Jing. There she fell fast asleep till tea time, leaving the house in unaccustomed quiet.

From tea time until the hour for the opening of the theatre she was in a condition of compressed excitement, as if she held any quantity of explosives within her, and were ready to burst and scatter at any moment.

Every member of her little world was in the theatre to look and listen. Juniper was in the pit, Mark in the circle, and the venerable Herr von in the orchestra. The rest of the household were on

the stage with her ; and Mrs. Broom having nothing to do for one act officiated as Esther's dresser, and did her best to keep her cool and confident.

The night passed in a torture of dreary waiting, a delirious moment of sick agony at the wings before each entrance, and a confused blurred sense that nothing was going right upon the stage.

The *débutante* was petted, applauded, and encouraged behind the scenes ; but the house was languid about her, to her disappointed fancy, even in the great act where she had made up her mind to drown the stage with tears.

The eminent tragedian of the evening got his customary call at the close of the performance, and he and Jing, as the recovered wife, led on the *débutante* between them. They were received with the overflowing plaudits and wild cat-calls of a

provincial Saturday night audience ; but none the less, to her own mind, Esther was a dreadful failure. The applause was all for the others and none of it for her. She had dressed in Jing's room that evening away from the crowd of her ordinary compeers, and was found there crying in a corner.

"Why, what's the matter, Esther?" Jing asked her, entering upon this unexpected scene.

"The matter!" cried Esther, rising with clenched teeth and hands, in a sudden storm of anger and self-contempt. "I'm a rotten failure. That's what's the matter."

Anything in the way of slang she heard seemed to stick to her like birdlime.

"Indeed, indeed," protested Jing, "you're nothing of the sort. You played the part very prettily, Esther. For a beginner, wonderfully."

"Oh yes," said Esther, falling back into her seat with a weary look of scorn. "For a beginner!" Then she melted into tears again and went on sobbing. "It's all very well for you to talk. You never had a beginning. Your own mother says you were carried on to the stage as a baby. You've been at it all your life." Then again she arose with quite a savage intensity: "If I'd had a thousandth part of your chances, I'd act your head off."

"I quite believe you would, my dear," Jing answered with absolute simplicity and sincerity.

"Oh, oh!" replied Esther, "you quite believe it! Much you believe it, don't you?"

"Rome wasn't built in a day, Esther," said Jing, seeking to be encouraging.

"Then it ought to have been," Esther replied

with illogical feminine logic, confounding the illustration with the fact it was meant to illustrate.

She went home dog tired, and cried herself to sleep, feeling utterly disillusionised and disappointed. She carried her sulks into the next day and the next; and the applause of her performance, in which everybody joined, served only to irritate and dispirit her.

It came to pass that for the whole of the next week her duties were so arranged that she had not one line to utter. Then it seemed to her changeable mind, which could never see anything the same colour two hours running, that she had been a sort of stage queen on the Saturday and was now put back into the theatrical scullery. It was bitter, insulting, unmerited, unbearable.

There was that mother of a family back again playing Sam Willoughby to Mr. Somebody's "Ticket of Leave Man," and giving a Dutch-figured representation of that impossible youngster to an accompaniment of shrieks of laughter from the audience.

If the management had only given *her* that part to play, what might she not have done with it? How she could have swaggered and coaxed, and with what an adorable simplicity Master Sam should have been cheated at cards if his conduct had lain in her hands! Whereas for the part that had really been entrusted to her, where was another at once so difficult and so thankless for a beginner?

The world and the fulness and fatness thereof were necessarily, and as a law of nature, all for

her ; and when anything came to her hands which was not precisely what she wanted, she felt righteously indignant and aggrieved. Now all life looked like a dreadful thralldom, and for some inscrutable reason all people were her enemies. All save perhaps the lady from London, who had promised her a future which she felt really fitted to adorn.

She looked often at Mrs. Jordan's card, and would indeed spend whole hours of brooding silence over it. She recalled Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop's laudations so often that they may be said to have lived with her.

At last—and the last was no later than the Thursday of that week—she chose an hour when she knew that the whole household would be absent, and came home with a travelling trunk.

Since his own successes Mark had kept her so plentifully supplied with everything she needed that she had never had occasion to encroach upon her salary. When everybody else spent for her, the graceless little person knew how to be extravagant; but when it came to spending for herself she was a petticoated little embodiment of avarice, as keen at a bargain as a Scotch pedlar or a Yorkshire horse-chaunter.

Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop was notified in the advertising columns of the *Era* as "Resting," and his address was given in Salisbury Street, Strand.

She had secreted a copy of the paper, and had marked Mr. Wilstrop's announcement with a border of ink so that she could find it easily at any moment. She copied it now into a little purse pocket-book which Mark had given her,

scrawling it over a whole page in her ill-bred uphill-and-down-dale handwriting. The study of penmanship and needlework had been the two intolerable tasks to her, and she had refused to waste her energies upon either of them.

She left the newspaper open on her dressing-table out of mere forgetfulness, but she packed up everything else she owned in the world ; and, without one thought of gratitude or friendship, she turned her back upon the house that had sheltered her, and the kind hearts that had given her love and patience these seventeen months past.

CHAPTER VIII.

SHE had kept the man who had carried her trunk in waiting whilst she packed, and when her preparations were finished she sent him in search of a four-wheeler. She knew herself to be tolerably safe from the chance of being detected in her flight by any member of the household ; but for all that she was a little nervous as she drove towards the station. Arrived there she hid herself in a corner of the waiting-room till the train was ready to depart. She knew she would have been ashamed to be discovered ; but that was the only tribute she had to give to the unbought kindness she was deserting.

She reached London early in the evening, and drove at once through the approaching dusk to 303 Long Acre.

It must be owned that London scarcely came up to her dreams. The afternoon was murky, and there was something like a Scotch mist, not an actual rain, but what seemed like a dirty exudation from the sombre air. Between Euston and Long Acre there were no such palaces as she had built in fancy.

She thought she had never seen anything quite so sordid and depressing as London seemed; and if without shame or trouble she could have gone back again, she would have reinstalled herself instantly in her deserted home.

Mrs. Jordan's residence was over a coach-builder's shop; and when Esther had alighted from

her cab and had rung the middle bell at the dirty green-painted side-door she waited in a little tremor for the appearance of her unexpected hostess.

The door was opened by a child of abnormally slatternly aspect, who was entrenched behind a great kitchen apron, foul with the accumulations of months of service. The child looked intelligent and docile, but was fearfully and wonderfully dirty, and she stared at the new comer through the tangles of her unkempt hair without a word.

“Does Mrs. Jordan live here?” Esther asked in misgiving.

The child nodded.

“Is she at home?”

The child nodded again.

“Will you tell her that Miss Delacour is here?”

The dirty maid turned and disappeared as if the gloom of the entrance had swallowed her, leaving Esther alone and wondering. The cabman, when she turned to look at him, seemed to eye her suspiciously and disparagingly as he chewed the tip of his whip-lash. She had no umbrella, and the drizzle was fast developing into a rain.

Altogether, what with the aspect of the house and the street, the oddity of her reception so far, the weather, the gloomy opinion of her expressed in the cabman's looks, and something in her own accusing conscience, she was nine-tenths inclined to cry. A voice from behind her made her turn with a start.

“Well, and what might *you* be pleased to want, miss?”

Mrs. Jordan had descended in not quite the best

of tempers. The companionship of the little flat bottle, though it brought its moments of gaiety and comfort, imposed certain penalties, amongst which an occasional tartness and shortness of temper was observable.

"Miss Delacour!" cried the lady, suddenly recognising her visitor and breaking into a beaming smile. "I *ham* pleased to see you. Come in, dear. Come in out of the wet this minute. *Is* that your box?"

She saw with satisfaction that the girl was apparently well provided, and that the trunk was not only new, but large and well made.

"Coachman, carry the young lady's box upstairs!"

"There's a pub next door, ain't there?" returned the cabman, who seemed to be of a

restful and reflective, as well as a gloomy turn of mind. "You'll find a cove there as 'll do it for a pint."

Mrs. Jordan stepped to the door of the public-house, pushed it half ajar, and beckoned. A slovenly fellow emerged in answer to this signal, with a dirty clay pipe, a dirty red comforter, and a dirty cloth cap cocked over one eye. He appreciated the situation at once, and while Mrs. Jordan counted out the fare, he, with the cabman's aid, shouldered the trunk and walked indoors with it.

Mrs. Jordan, mincing across the muddy pavement with a petticoat thrown over her head and shoulders, tendered the gloomy driver one shilling and twopence. The cabman would not take it all at once, but sniffed and gazed suspiciously.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"It's your fare," said Mrs. Jordan. "A shilling for the young lady and twopence for the parcel."

"Oh, that's it, is it?" said the driver. "It's tuppence for the parcel, is it? That's what you call a tuppenny parcel? Next time the young lady takes a railway journey tell her to bring the bloomin' railway engine 'ome. It won't hurt the cab and it won't fatigue the 'orse, and the legal charge is tuppence. Thank you kindly, mum, if you don't want any discount on a ready-money job!"

"If you're impertinent," said Mrs. Jordan from the shelter of the doorway, "I'll make you drive me to Bow Street Station."

The features of the gloomy cabman were suddenly irradiated with a smile. He skipped with

an unexpected dexterity from his seat and opened the side door of the vehicle.

“Jump in, mum. They *will* be glad to see you there. They must be reg’lar tired of lookin’ for you by this time.”

He had an audience of a score already, and this promising to increase, Mrs. Jordan slammed the door of the house. Routed in dialectics, she had gained the financial battle and was content.

Mrs. Jordan was wonderfully smooth and flattering, and Esther had never been so carneyed and bepraised in all her life as by this hospitable and effusive lady.

Mrs. Jordan admired everything she wore, everything she did, and everything she said. Had all her hairs been excellences, Mrs. Jordan would have found a word of approbation for each one ;

and if Mrs. Jordan had been fifty times as fulsome as she was, Esther's appetite of vanity was sharp set enough to have swallowed every compliment.

"What lovely 'air to be sure!" cried Mrs. Jordan, helping the girl to remove her hat. "And what 'avoc you will make of those eyes of yours, my dear! Ah, there now, you're blushing, and I'm sure it becomes you lovely."

Esther accepted it all as her natural right. She had at last found a woman of discernment. She thought very highly of Mrs. Jordan's judgment.

"Now tell me, dearie," said that pleasing lady, "have you come up to London to stay, or do you think of going back again?"

"No," said Esther. "I want to stay. I don't want to go back again, if I can help it."

"If you can help it!" shrilled Mrs. Jordan. "I'll warrant they'll jump at you at the Frivolity. They'll give you five and twenty shillings a week at once."

This was not quite the salary Miss Esther had expected her enthusiastic friend, of all people in the world, to name; and her face clouded noticeably.

"Ah, my dearie," said Mrs. Jordan. "You don't know what five and twenty shillings a week means at the Frivolity. There's young ladies there getting no more than that as wears their diamonds and keeps their carriages and pairs."

Esther looked gravely at her with large inquiring eyes.

"I don't see how they manage that," she said.

“Why, they find kind friends, my dearie,” said Mrs. Jordan, writhing her body like a worm, and smiling more insinuatingly than ever. “There’s gentlemen, sometimes the highest in the land, my dear, as takes a fancy to them for their pretty faces, and protects ’em, love.”

“Oh!” said Esther, with a round solemnity of tone. “That’s how it is!”

She understood that perfectly, of course. It was already well within her own experience. Mark had taken a fancy to her for her pretty face, and had protected her. He had not been rich enough to buy diamonds for her, and give her a carriage and pair; but turning the matter over in her reflective mind, she came to the conclusion that only the want of means on Mark’s part, and not the want of will, had kept her from the enjoyment of those de-

sirable possessions. When she had quite digested her thoughts, she made them over to Mrs. Jordan, who smiled and wriggled in a receptive ecstasy, throwing in a "Just so, dearie," or "To be sure, love," wherever an opening offered.

"We'll have our teas now, my little darling," said the enthusiastic hostess. "And then when you've rested a bit after it, it'll be time to go down to the Frivolity and see Old Sedgebrook." She rang the bell for the dirty little maid, and gave her instructions to put the kettle on. "I'm going to fetch out my very best tea service, dear, and in a minute I'll tell you why." Unlocking the door of a cupboard in the wall she produced a plateau of electroplate, and placed it gingerly, as if it were breakable, in Esther's hands. "Look at that, my love."

Esther, observing an inscription in the centre of the plateau, turned it to the light and read :—

“ From Pollie Grantham to Mammie Jordan ”.

The owner of the precious article stood smiling by with an air of pride and mystery, and taking the object from Esther's hands, set it carefully upon the table and drew a second from the cupboard. This was an electro-plated cream ewer with a gilt interior, and it bore the same inscription. Then came a sugar-bowl, and finally a teapot, both inscribed in the like fashion, and the latter was handled with especial care and reverence. The bulbous little electro feet of the ewer, the bowl, and the teapot, were all sewn up tightly in socks of wash-leather, as if they had the gout, a precaution taken against the

possible scratching of the virgin surface of the tray.

When all four pieces had been displayed and examined in silence, Esther looked at her hostess with an air of inquiry.

"You've heard of Miss Grantham, haven't you, fairy?" said Mrs. Jordan, with a mincing skip and a smile of most delicate meaning.

"A lady called Miss Grantham came to Birmingham last spring," said Esther. "She played Lady Teazle and Miss Hardcastle."

"That is the same identical lady," said Mrs. Jordan. "It is only nine years ago, dear, that she came to me not half as pretty as you are, nor yet a quarter as well provided. Now she's got a great big house in Bedford Square, and she keeps half a dozen servants.

Two footmen amongst 'em, my dear, with their 'air in powder!"

"Did she go to the Frivolity?" Esther asked eagerly.

"That's where she begun, dearie. She was a takin' girl to look at; but she'd neither your face nor figure, my dear, nor yet your 'ead of 'air!"

Esther, fully inclined to be satisfied with herself by nature, became more and more content under Mrs. Jordan's approval. It had always been agreeable to know that she was pretty, and still more agreeable to be told of it; but to learn that being pretty carried with it the surprising material advantages Mrs. Jordan spoke of, was just as novel and surprising as it was pleasant. She was little more than a child yet, and as ignorant and innocent as a baby.

Mrs. Jordan busied herself about the prepara-

tions for tea ; toasting and buttering muffins with her own hands, and setting two or three sausages down before the fire in a Dutch oven. Mrs. Jordan's idea of luxury was to have things greasy.

The crown of the meal was a plenteous lacing of the tea with rum—an innovation on custom and experience which Esther accepted very kindly. She began to chatter with the greatest animation, and amongst other things and persons mentioned Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop and his fatherly approval of her in the part of the Fairy Sunshine.

“Ah, my dear,” said Mrs. Jordan, warming into poetry, “that was the part, and that was the name for you. Fairy Sunshine you was. Fairy Sunshine you are. Fairy Sunshine you ever shall be.” She embraced her young friend after this outburst, and descended to practicalities. “You must see

Wilstrop as well as old Sedgebrook, my dear. If all that's said is true, Wilstrop is a particular pal of old Walker Mayhill, and Walker Mayhill can make any manager in London do anything."

"Why, how's that?" asked Esther.

"Ah, my dear," said Mrs. Jordan with a smile of profound meaning, "older and wiser heads than yours might ask that question. But in the profession, my dear, there's a good many wheels within wheels. There's a lot as the outside public never dreams of, and wouldn't believe it, not if you was to swear it on your bended knees before 'em. If Walker Mayhill was to go to any manager in London and was to say, 'I want you to engage Miss Delacour,' they've got to do it."

"Why?" said Esther, with a little flush of antagonism. She felt for the moment as if she

were a manager facing a tyrannical somebody who ordered her against her inclination, and was vicariously indignant.

"Ah, why?" said Mrs. Jordan with an air growing mysterious, confidential and comfortable. "Walker Mayhill's the critic of the *M. M.*, my dear."

"The what?" asked Esther.

"The *Morning Mercury*," said Mrs. Jordan. "*M. M.*'s the short for it. A good line in the *M. M.*—a real good line—might be worth thousands to a management. Mayhill's a man as knows his way about, my love, almost as well as anybody. He knows what a good line's worth, and he knows what it's worth to him, as well as to other people. He gets his own way pretty free, old Walker Mayhill does." All people were "old" to Mrs. Jordan when she desired to express

knowledge of them or familiarity with them. "You mustn't forget old Wilstrop neither," she continued. "He's away up now, and being as thick as he is with Mayhill, he can be very useful to you; but we'll see old Sedgebrook first, and have two strings to our bow. It's about time to get on your hat and jacket. You'd better put on your prettiest dress, my dear, and make yourself look as nice as ever you can."

The good lady helped her visitor, and acted as lady's maid to her, and finally professing herself eminently satisfied with the result of their joint labour, ran into her own room and returned in a minute or two looking as neat and precise as if she had spent an hour upon her toilet. The weather had cleared up since Esther's arrival. Stars were visible here and there through the

smoky atmosphere, and a watery moon hung over the Drury Lane housetops. They made their way on foot to the Frivolity Theatre, and Mrs. Jordan fearlessly led the way to the lodge of the stage-doorkeeper. Before making any appeal to that functionary she seemed to recall something.

“I ought to have looked in at The Three Threes, my dear. It’s about the time when I might expect to find a friend of mine there.”

They went back into the roaring Strand, and found together the establishment she indicated. Mrs. Jordan’s friend was not to be seen there; and Mrs. Jordan, whispering that it would be unfair to come into the house for nothing, ordered two glasses of port. Esther hesitating a little, her guide rather fussily bade her drink the wine.

“ It will give you a colour, my darling, and put a bit of sparkle in your eyes. Don’t be afraid of it ; take it.”

Esther took it, and its first results were experienced in a disagreeable shudder. That passed, and she became voluble and confident, and felt fit to face armies.

She was so bolstered by the flatteries of her companion, and so inspired by the stories she had heard, that she felt sure of immediate victory, and walked back to the theatre arm-in-arm with her philosopher and friend in a little tempest of high spirits.

The stage-doorkeeper passed them without question, and ascending a flight of steps, they found themselves upon the stage. Mrs. Jordan asked for Mr. Sedgebrook ; and finding that the

manager had not arrived, bestowed her charge in the green-room, herself taking up a position at the wings, and watching thence the progress of a somewhat dreary farcical comedy which served as a curtain-raiser to the burlesque of the evening.

Esther, being alone in the green-room, strayed about there, inspecting the photographs and lithographs of the popular beauties, who, in days new or old, had decorated the boards of the house.

The Frivolity had for years been famous for its choice of pretty women, and legs were its stronghold. About the walls of the green-room ladies with legs were everywhere, slim and buxom, short and tall, *mignon* and magnificent, all in tights, and all posing and smiling as if ani-

mated by the most joyful or most amiable sentiments.

Miss Esther criticised this show of beauty with a growing self-satisfaction. This lady's nose was too long, that other's eyes were too small, the lips of a third were coarse to her critical and self-appreciative fancy, and the feet and hands of a fourth were monstrous. She put out one of her prettily booted little feet and surveyed it to point the contrast, and observing an oval mirror with bevelled edge against the walls, carried her comparison against the rival beauties a little further.

She was smiling rather artificially to get a view of her own milk-white teeth when a door opened suddenly and silently, and a gentleman entering

caught her in the act and stood grinning with a half-faded cynical enjoyment. Esther had kept an eye through the mirror upon the door by which she herself had entered; but the newcomer, walking through the pass-door which led direct from the front of the house, had come upon her unawares; and for a moment—but for a moment only—she felt confused and foolish. The gentleman was rather more than portly. He was huge-hipped and bore a swaggering paunch before him, and having sloping shoulders and a head disproportionately small for his body, he had a wedge-shaped or pyramidal look. He was spotlessly attired in evening dress, and in his great white plastron of shirt front blazed a single diamond, which somehow assorted rather ill with his general aspect, and even seemed to

emphasise a certain vulgarity of face and carriage.

Almost immediately upon his heels came a gentleman of a very different type. A tall, stately, white-haired, white-mustachioed, aristocratic-looking old man, who wore an eye-glass and walked with a painful affectation of youth and gaiety. He also was in evening dress, but wore a modest black tie and three tiny studs of plain gold. His eye-glass had an old-fashioned black horn rim, and was suspended by an old-fashioned ribbon of watered silk. He looked as tired as death when he came in, but at the sight of Esther's blushing cheeks and attitude of naive confusion he brightened up wonderfully.

"Well, my dear," said the first comer in

a tone of bland jocularly, "what are *you* doing here?"

"Mrs. Jordan brought me, sir, to see Mr. Sedgebrook."

"Oh," said he smiling, with a backward look at his companion. "You want to see Mr. Sedgebrook? And what do you want to see Mr. Sedgebrook for?"

"I want to get an engagement," said Esther. She had not quite recovered her confidence in herself. The expanse of shirt front frightened her, and seemed to glare at her like a sunlit white-washed wall. The tone of badinage, too, shook her so far that it made her errand look ridiculous. She felt as if the gentleman with the diamond solitaire was chaffing her presumption,

“ Oh, you want an engagement, do you? May I ask what is your line, young lady? ”

Esther had been thinking all the evening that her line was to look pretty, and to be paid in carriages and diamonds for doing so ; but these were ambitions she could hardly impart to a stranger.

“ I played Fairy Sunshine,” she answered, “ in last year’s pantomime at the Royal at Birmingham. Last Saturday I played Henri in ‘ Belphegor ’. I got very good notices.”

She had put these same notices in her purse. One of them, which she knew to have been written by Mark, was full of warm and delicate praise, and prophesied a future for her, while it read her a gentle lesson or two. As she spoke she put her hand to her dress pocket, but her interlocutor smiled and waved her to be quiet.

“Never mind the notices, my dear. What is your name?”

“Miss Evelyn Delacour,” said Esther.

The man with the solitaire grinned outright, and the elderly gentleman smiled with lifted eyebrows. They shrugged their shoulders at each other, and then said the fat man aside with a half bow :—

“An excellent name, your grace”.

The Duke of Belisle, on whose family name Mark had stumbled, gave an assenting smile, but said nothing. The new adherent to the great house of Delacour looked on at the by-play with no understanding.

“I think,” said the fat man, in a deliberate self-communing tone, keeping a side-way eye upon his grace, “I think that Mr. Sedgebrook may be likely to engage.”

The old nobleman gave a scarcely perceptible nod, and at this moment Mrs. Jordan opened the green-room door. She saw at once that Esther was no longer alone, and beat a precipitate retreat. The fat man called after her, and she came back curtsying with much humbleness to the old nobleman.

“It was you who brought this young lady here, Mrs. Jordan?” the manager asked in a business voice.

“Yes, Mr. Sedgebrook,” she answered, with another curtsy.

“You want an engagement for her?”

“If you could find a place for her, Mr. Sedgebrook.”

“Well; what do you want?”

“Oh, Mr. Sedgebrook!”

The gloved hands were spread abroad in humble

protest, as if it were impossible to fix limits to the manager's generosity.

"She can have five and twenty shillings a week," said Mr. Sedgebrook. "And she can come in a fortnight. She'll have to walk on. I can't promise her a part for months to come."

"What, Mr. Sedgebrook," said Mrs. Jordan with a drooping disappointment, "not even at Christmas?"

"I don't know," said the manager. "There'll be plenty of time to think about that when we see what she's like."

His grace, who had been fumbling curiously in his waistcoat pocket with gloved thumb and forefinger, left the room at this juncture by the door leading to the stage.

Esther's spirits were not so bright as they had been, and the manager's speech had closed the

door at least on dramatic ambition for the time being.

"She's a bright clever little lady, Mr. Sedgebrook," said Mrs. Jordan, and would have flowed on into enthusiasm if the manager had not at once arrested her.

"Don't you try to teach me my business, Mrs. Jordan. If there's anything in the girl she'll have her chance. You can leave that to me quite safely. She can come Monday fortnight. Good-evening."

There was nothing for it but to answer this curt dismissal by an immediate departure, and Mrs. Jordan and her charge withdrew.

The Duke of Belisle was marching up and down outside with an air more juvenile than he had borne before.

"Good-evening, your grace," said Mrs. Jordan, sinking half to her knees as she passed him.

"Good-evening, Mrs. Jordan, good-evening," the aged nobleman responded, with a stately affability.

He glanced meaningly downwards towards his own thumb and finger, where lay a crisp-looking bit of paper folded into a very small compass.

"Oh, your grace!" cried Mrs. Jordan, curtsying lower than ever.

The crisp little bit of paper changed hands.

"My dear," whispered Mrs. Jordan as they came into the street, "your fortune's made."

"I don't know about that," said Esther, pouting. "I'm not going to wait for more than a fortnight, and then walk on"—with an accent of intense disdain—"amongst a lot of squinting extras. I

don't want to stand to be stared at. I want something to do. I want to get on. I shall go and see Mr. Wilstrop in the morning."

"So do, by all means, dearie," said Mrs. Jordan, fingering the crisp paper in her pocket, and thinking this first flake the precursor of a snow-storm. "As I said before we came out, dear, it's a good thing to have two strings to your bow, and even if Wilstrop's good for nothing you can make your fortune at the Friv."

She did not return directly homewards, but led the way back to The Three Threes, in expectation, as she was careful to tell Esther, that her friend had turned up there in the meantime. The friend was still absent; and Mrs. Jordan, unwilling to leave the house shabbily, ordered two more glasses of port.

Esther flatly refusing to touch the wine, Mrs. Jordan drank it for her, so that it might not be wasted, and so took her guest home, entertaining her there and by the way with such hints of future splendour that the girl's senses were quite dazzled.

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